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AN EXAMINATION OF THE CONCEPT OF A THEOLOGY OF LAUGHTER, AND THE USE OF LAUGHTER AND HUMOUR AS 'WORDS AGAINST DEATH' AS DEFINED BY DOUGLAS DAVIES IN *DEATH, RITUAL AND BELIEF* (1997)

BARRY JAMES FRY

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I declare that no portion of the work referred to in the Thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

I confirm that this Thesis is entirely my own work.

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to contribute to the further development of a Christian theology of laughter, and to present a little-discussed aspect of laughter as a 'word against death'. The methodology employed is that of historical theology. In seeking to further develop a Christian theology of laughter, the thesis considers the initial ground-breaking work in this field of theological research suggested by Richard Cote in *Holy Mirth: A Theology of Laughter* (1986), together with that of Karl-Josef Kuschel in *Laughter: A Theological Reflection* (1994) concerning the positive aspects of laughter and humour, together with the more recent work of Jacqueline Bussie on that negative laughter which is devoid of either humour or comedy, which she entitled *The Laughter of the Oppressed* (2007). Held in tandem and further developed, I argue this provides us with a Christian theology of laughter with a more balanced approach to use as a tool for further theological research.

The thesis includes a critical review of how laughter is treated in the Bible , together with a consideration of how early Christian Gnostic texts (including material from the Nag Hammadi Library discovered in 1945) contribute additional evidence of Christian approaches to laughter. With these historical foundational texts in place, further treatment of how laughter has been viewed in the Christian tradition is critically considered, from its negative condemnation by various early Church theologians and in monastic circles, to its persistence during the Medieval period in both carnival and Church feasts, through to its gradual rehabilitation, particularly during the Renaissance and Reformation periods, and then through the period of the enlightenment into the modern and post-modern eras.

Because the theme of laughter is broad and many-hued in its nature, and because scholarly discussion of Christian laughter has not yet produced a 'critical mass' for providing a recognisable Christian theology of laughter, a preliminary discussion of how laughter and comedy need to be distinguished, and a survey of key contributors to the debate, forms an introduction to this thesis, further developed in a literature review. The specific nature of Christian laughter as it may be used in several contexts to challenge the view of death has the last word, particularly in its own resurrection hope in providing the 'last laugh' against death, is a distinct lens through which Christian laughter is focused in this thesis, making a distinct contribution to a theology of laughter.

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INTRODUCTION

“Every time a man smiles, but much more so when he laughs, it adds something to this Fragment of Life” (Laurence Sterne in the Preface to The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, 1759).

This thesis has two aims: first, to recover and reconstruct theologies of laughter in the Christian tradition; second, to attempt a theology of laughter which incorporates the possibility of some laughter qualifying as ‘words against death’ as defined by Douglas Davies (1997) (see pp.17-27, below). I will argue the general context of why tackling a theology of laughter is important is connected with the need to establish a positive and vital link between Christian laughter and joy resulting from the resurrection of Christ from the dead, which I suggest immediately links with a consideration of Christian laughter and humour as a potential 'word against death'. I will be employing Davies's work and definition as a basis for critical appraisal.

But this is a project which also requires looking at both the positive and negative aspects of laughter; there is a contrast to be drawn between laughter which is flippant, facile, or pejorative, from what I would envisage as Christian laughter as an expression of joie de vivre, basically connected to joy as the fruit of the Holy Spirit, in which joy through the resurrection of Christ and Christian living are intimately linked, and I believe provides a more healthy expression for Christian faith and witness. Although joy and laughter differ, they are nonetheless connected, with laughter often arising from joy (but not necessarily). I therefore consider that joy in the resurrection should reside in any Christian response to death, and to the evil in this world which leads to suffering for so many.

My analysis and critical understanding of the material I have looked at in seeking to construct a theology of laughter within the Christian tradition leads me to suggest such a distinctive theology of laughter is possible. John Climacus, seventh-century Abbot of St Catherine's Monastery in Sinai asserted: 'God does not want human beings to be sad due to pain in their soul, but rather that their souls may laugh and be joyful out of love towards him', that: 'God does not demand or desire that someone should mourn out of sorrow of heart, but rather that out of love for Him he should rejoice with the laughter of the soul' (http://www.scribd.com/doc/72993714/St-John-Climacus-The-Ladder-of-Divine-Ascent#scribd trans. Eusebios Christofi p.23). This encapsulates much of what I shall argue, and why tracing the not-so-straight path of laughter and joy through the Bible, Christian tradition and history will become a way to establishing a Christian theology of laughter for today. This can then be applied specifically to the role of laughter as a ‘word against death’. The discussion will oscillate between these two

distinct but interlocking aims. I believe the development of a robust Christian theology of laughter is needed: (1) for the Church, because the Church has become too serious and does not understand how to handle laughter in its message and ministry; and, (2) it calls into question how the Church addresses the wider society, and how it gives an example of authentic human living in all its potential as an expression of being made in the 'image of God' (see Genesis 1.27).

The following elements will feature in my thesis, namely; (1) a Christian theology of laughter cannot be expressed definitively, but in an open-ended framework, which is nonetheless flexible enough to develop and grow according to where the Church and society are at any moment in history; (2) the multi-faceted nature of laughter needs to be acknowledged, and, surprising though this may seem, will include laughter in the most oppressive circumstances of injustice, perhaps even death; (3) the Church needs not only to respect the seriousness of its life and mission, but also the need to live in the present with joy and laughter, i.e., it is too serious at times, and needs to 'lighten up'; (4) the inclusion of Christian laughter as an effective protest against injustice and as a 'word against death'.

My desire is to argue that one way to understand laughter within a Christian theological hermeneutic is as a ‘word against death’ as defined by Douglas Davies (considered shortly). Though the late twentieth century saw in the post-modern reaction against Enlightenment dualism a re-centring of the body in theological discourse, the focus of re-centring has been largely around sexuality and gender (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998.140). This thesis seeks to include laughter, and here I seek to define laughter, humour, and the other associated terms used. I then introduce different approaches to the sociology of humour, and the three dominant theories relating to it, before introducing the work of Douglas Davies and his concept of 'words against death'. I then outline the methodology to be employed in this research, before reviewing the outline structure of the various chapters to follow.

Some Definitions Regarding What Makes Us Laugh

Laughter appears to be a universal human activity, an ability that precedes that of speech and which is not dependent upon the ability to see or hear (Gervais and Wilson, 2005.396-430). Laughter can be induced by certain physical activities such as tickling (also evident in primates), an outward physiological response to a stimulus, an ‘overt expression’ that results from the experience of humour and comedy (Hyers, 1969.1-7). There are many different reasons for laughter. It can be an involuntary

response to non-humorous situations such as shame, humiliation, embarrassment, tension, and even tragedy. Whilst laughter can be feigned or stifled, genuine laughter is a spontaneous and uncontrollable response, which can release endorphins in the brain, and has been shown to have several beneficial impacts upon health, including the reduction of pain, increase in blood flow, and healthier heart-function (Smith, 1990.86). Here we need to define the terms of what we mean by laughter, humour, and the joy and mirth often associated with them, and to give consideration of the difference between what is defined as the comic and the comedic.

Laughter is defined by the *Concise English Dictionary* (1976) as the act or sound of laughing, and to laugh is to make the spontaneous sounds and movements used in expressing lively amusement, but which may in some circumstances denote scorn, derision, or ridicule, such as to mock or make fun of. Cyrus Henry Hoy's article in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/276309/humour) describes spontaneous laughter as a motor reflex produced by the coordinated contraction of fifteen facial muscles in a stereotyped pattern and accompanied by altered breathing, noting facial expressions range from a faint smile, through the broad grin, to the contortions typical of explosive laughter, seeing it as a reflex, unique in appearing to have no biological purpose, whose only function seems to be to provide relief from tension. Laughter is a phenomenon of the trigger-releaser type: a sudden turn of the tap may release stored emotions, derived from various, often unconscious, sources, where tension is exploded in laughter. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1973) describes laughter as the action of laughing, and as a manner of laughing, citing Homer's *Iliad* (i.599) as an example of irrepressible laughter, and Psalm 125.3 (in Coverdale's translation) as another.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines humour as the condition of being amusing or comic, and as less intellectual and more sympathetic than wit. Expressions of humour are found in both literature and speech, with a sense of humour seen as the ability to perceive or express laughter or to take a joke, or as a mood or state of mind. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (1973) considers it a mental disposition, a temporary state of mind, mood, or temper, but may be habitual: 'A state of mind having no apparent ground or reason; mere fancy, whim, caprice, freak, vagary', or as 'That quality of action, speech, or writing, which excites amusement; oddity, comicality'. It considers humour: 'the faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing, or of expressing it; jocose imagination or treatment of a subject', something 'less purely intellectual than *wit*, and often allied to pathos'. Hoy's *Britannica* article describes humour as communication in which the stimulus produces amusement,

defining it as a type of stimulation that tends to elicit the laughter reflex, noting humour is native to humankind (www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/276309/humour).

Whilst acknowledging dictionary or encyclopaedia definitions are of necessity brief and basic, they are of their time and potentially misleading, and whilst not particularly scholarly sources, they *do* give us a starting-point towards a more scholarly analysis, highlighting Wittgenstein's point the meaning of a word lies in the way it is used, which may historically develop or change over time and common usage, and the meaning may therefore be embedded in its context and use. I particularly focus on laughter which is induced by humour, whilst not losing sight of humour used as a 'word against death'.

Humour can display various facets: it can be droll, facetious, or comical, but has an evasive quality, whose complexity Michael Billig suggests cannot be considered as a unitary entity, and which: 'no single theory can hope to explain' (2005.175), being paradoxical by nature, both universal and particular, social and anti-social, which: 'appears mysterious and resistant to analysis, whilst being understandable and analyzable' (2005.176), but which is nonetheless found in an event or expression of ideas that evokes a physical response of laughter. Over the centuries humour has been the subject of numerous theories to describe its origins, but whilst there has been little scholarly consensus on what actually constitutes humour, it is more usually understood as encompassed within the discipline of philosophy. One of the problems relating to the philosophical study of humour has focused on the development of a satisfactory definition, where until relatively recently humour has been treated as roughly co-extensive with laughter (*Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* 'On Humor': http://www.iep.utm.edu/humor/), but now has become subject to more sociological investigation and enquiry. Whilst these relatively distinct phenomena are intimately connected in some manner, clearly distinguishing between them is problematic, Billig commenting: 'links [between] laughter and humour cannot be taken for granted' (2005.176).

The field is riddled with equivocations when trying to distinguish between humour and laughter. John Morreall summarised the finer distinction between them as: 'Laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift, whereas humour arises from a pleasant cognitive shift' (www.iep.utm.edu/humor/). Either way, humour or amusement is seen by various theorists as a response to a certain kinds of stimuli, which Jim Lyttle (1997) suggests fall into three categories: (1) Functional: asking what purpose humour has in human life; (2) Stimuli: asking what makes a particular thing funny; and, (3) Response:

asking why we find things funny, and what is particular about feelings of humour. This standard analysis was propounded by D.H. Monro (1951); other scholars have argued this is an over-simplification and each theory can have variants, even suggesting a potential fourth group (on pp. 9-11, below).

Since joy and mirth are frequently associated with laughter and humour, we turn to some definitions. Joy is defined by the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* as a vivid emotion of pleasure, or extreme gladness, and by the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* as: 'to enjoy oneself; to rejoice; … to feel or manifest joy; to be glad; to rejoice or delight'; 'To salute with expressions of joy (is to) welcome, or honour, … to glorify, extol'. The *Concise English Dictionary* sees mirth as merriment, and connected with laughter. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* describes mirth as: 'pleasurable feeling; joy, happiness', of: 'manifested rejoicing; merry-making'; something likely to lead to: 'merriment, hilarity', which in earlier usage could denote fun or ridicule. To be mirthful is to be: 'gladsome, hilarious, and is characterised by rejoicing'.

Associated with laughter and mirth is comedy, described by the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* as a light and amusing stage play, with a happy conclusion to its plot. Comedy is a term formerly applied to narrative poems and mystery plays, and interludes with happy endings. It is that branch of the drama that adopts a humorous or familiar style, and depicts laughable characters and incidents. Hoy's article defines comedy as a type of drama or other art form the chief object of which, according to modern notions, is to amuse. It contrasts with tragedy, and with farce, burlesque, and other forms of humorous amusement. Northrop Frye (1957.160) notes the trajectory of tragedy's plot is increasingly inevitable, driven by fate, with a 'sad' conclusion, whereas comedy is resistant to fate, thrives on the unforeseen, the plot usually resolving in a 'happy' ending. John Morreall notes: 'while tragedy emphasizes the inevitable, comedy emphasizes fortune and serendipity' (1999.28), the difference being tragedy's end is funeral, whereas comedy's end is festival, an important point in establishing humour and laughter as 'words against death'.

The history of comedy, from Aristotle in fourth century BCE Greece, persisting through to the present, holds comedy as primarily concerned with humans as social beings, rather than as private persons, functioning as a corrective by holding up a mirror to society to reflect its follies and vices, in the hope that such will be amended. Aristotle noted how comedy deals with the ridiculous, which Plato in *Philebus* defined as a failure of self-knowledge - laughable in private individuals (the personages of comedy), but terrible in persons who wield power (the personages of tragedy).

It is important to note 'comic' and 'comedic' are not the same. The *Oxford English Dictionary* attests ‘comic’ is most frequently defined as describing something that evokes laughter and/or amuses, often with *humorous* designated as a synonym. ‘Comic’ can be used synonymously with ‘comical’, whereas ‘comedic’ is seen in a narrower grammatical sense as the adjectival form of ‘comedy’. Further distinction between the two is explored in my Literature Review of Janis Udris’ thesis on *Grotesque and Excremental Humour: Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life* (1988). But here I note the 'classical' notion of comedy is generally defined in relation to “tragedy”, but since it was found to be impossible to coexist within any adequate model of psychology or sociology, the terms 'comedic' and 'comedicity' were coined to encompass the state of an element defined as comedic. Udris speculates whether the comedic can be defined in the abstract, given there have been numerous attempts by various authors to 'define' comedy (see 1988.66-70), concluding: 'The comedic can surely only ultimately be defined in relation to some response evoked in the receiving subject', and: 'an adequate definition of “comic response” would seem to be a more serious problem' (1988.70).

There is often a close relationship between humour and the comic (indicated in the *OED* definition linking the two as synonymous), but whilst it is difficult to differentiate between them, clearly they are not entirely identical, even if scholars such as Henri Bergson and J. William Whedbee have used them in a synonymous and interchangeable manner, with Morreall suggesting: ‘it is precisely in humour that we find the core of comedy’ (1999.13).

In its ancient origins comedy was about the ability to transcend the baseness of life, a movement from the low to the high, evident, for example, in Dante’s journey from hell to paradise in his *La Commedia (The Comedy),* later called *The Divine Comedy*. Comedy then may not necessarily result in laughter. Hoy's article notes how comedy and tragedy often go hand in hand (as do laughing and weeping, a pertinent consideration of laughter as a ‘word against death'), marking the extremes of a continuous spectrum. Aelius Donatus, the fourth-century Latin grammarian, distinguished between comedy and tragedy, suggesting comedies begin in trouble and end in peace, whereas tragedies begin in calm and end in tempest (www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/276309/humour). Hoy considers the basic Aristotelian differentiation distinguishing them being that tragedy imitates men who are better than the average, often personages of high estate, whereas comedy deals with those considered as worst, i.e. the lowly in society. He reports how the ancient Roman poet Horace noted the stylistic differences between the different genres of comedy and

tragedy, and the special effects achieved when comedy lifts its voice in pseudo-tragic rant, where tragedy adopts the prosaic but affecting language of comedy. When consciously combined, this mixture of styles produces the burlesque, whereby the grand manner may be applied to a trivial subject, or conversely a serious subject is subjected to a vulgar treatment, resulting in a ludicrous effect. Henry Fielding, the English novelist, distinguishes between the comic and the burlesque in *Joseph Andrews* (1742), suggesting that comedy confines itself to the imitation of nature, in particular human nature as viewed in the ordinary scenes of civilised society, whereas the burlesque centres on the monstrous and unnatural, giving pleasure through the surprising absurdity it exhibits in appropriating the manners of the highest to the lowest, or vice versa (1742.Preface).

Whilst there is a certain degree of overlap between humour, joy, mirth, and laughter, my work will primarily be concerned with humour and laughter as positive and constructive towards developing a Christian theology of laughter (in which mirth and joy may also come into play). Consideration will be given to the insights from the sociology of laughter and humour, in which I draw upon various scholars. Giselinde Kuipers in a paper entitled *The Sociology of Humor* (https://uva.academia.edu/giselindekuipers) (2008), notes:

> Humor is a quintessentially social phenomenon. Jokes and other humorous utterances are a form of communication that is usually shared in social interaction. These humorous utterances are socially and culturally shaped, and often quite particular to a specific time and place. And the topics and themes people joke about are generally central to the social, cultural and moral order of a society or a social group. (2008.365)

For Kuipers, the *functionalist approach* interprets humour in terms of the social functions it fulfils for a society or social group, noting how, in older studies of humour, functionalist interpretations tended to stress how humour (and other social phenomena) maintain and support the social order, in which joking is seen as a way to relieve tension in possibly strained relationships, thus maintaining the social order in situations containing some structural conflict or contradiction. However, *conflict theories* see humour as an expression of conflict, struggle, or antagonism, where (contrasting with functionalist theories): 'humor is interpreted not as venting off – and hence avoidance or reduction – but as an expression or correlation of social conflict: humor as a weapon, a form of attack, a means of defence (Speier 1998)' (2008.372). She notes how conflict theories have been used: 'especially in the analysis of ethnic

and political humor, both cases where the use of humor has a clear target, and tends to be correlated with conflict and group antagonism' (2008.372).

Kuipers considers the conflict approach the most contested approach in sociological humour studies, in that it has been used mainly to explain and analyse potentially offensive forms of humour, especially societal controversies about ethnic, sexist, or political humour, where the central criticism levelled against this approach is that it takes humour too literally, thereby ignoring humour's basic ambiguity, in which a joke can be enjoyed for many different reasons. A further drawback she identifies is that: 'conflict theories generally cannot explain why and when people in situations of conflict decide to use humor rather than more serious expressions of antagonism' (2008.377).

Kuipers considers that *symbolic interactionist approaches* focus on the role of humour in the construction of meanings and social relations in social interaction, whereby: 'in small-scale studies of symbolic interactionists, humor, joking, and laughter are no longer marginal and frivolous' (2008.379). Rather, she perceives them as being at the heart of social analysis, crucial to the shaping of meanings, situations, selves, and relationships, noting: 'Critics of this approach have pointed out that symbolic interactionist studies tend to be overly descriptive and particular, and hence hard to generalize' (2008.380). In the *phenomenological approach*, Kuipers sees humour as conceptualized as a specific "outlook" or "worldview" or "mode" of perceiving and constructing the social world, in which this humorous outlook is generally considered to be but one option among several in defining the "social construction of reality". She identifies this post-1970s approach to humour as eclectic in terms of methodology, but considers through combining textual analysis, historical data, and micro-interactionist studies, it can show how humour constructs and at the same time entails a particular worldview.

For Kuipers, the *historical-comparative approach* has been the favoured means for most sociological work on humour since the 1990s. She sees this as a vague umbrella term denoting how comparative-historical studies of humour have been conducted in various scholarly fields by drawing upon different theoretical traditions, its drawback being: 'there is no central theory or school of thought in comparative-historical humor studies' (2008.382). She notes how comparisons across time and space generally show great variations as well as some universalities, whereas: 'Constants in humor across cultures are primarily the preferred topics for joking: sexuality, gender relations, bodily functions, stupidity, and strangers (Apte 1985), … but even within these constants, there are great variations: in humorous forms, genres and techniques as

well as in humorous content' (2008.383). She notes how a cross-comparison of humour often ends up telling us as much about the groups being compared as it tells us about humour, and what people joke about reflects both what they find important, and what is a source of concern to them (2008.384). In respect of the historical-comparative approach, Kuipers says: 'recent studies, while not explicitly comparative in their approach, give rise to intriguing comparative questions about social and cultural conditions conducive or prohibitive to humor' (2008.386).

Whilst Kuipers' work focuses on the sociology of humour, she acknowledges: 'in humor studies, there has been a tendency to exclude laughter from the analysis, because there is no necessary one-on-one relationship between humor and laughter' (2008.389). However, she notes how symbolic interactionists and phenomenologists have brought laughter to the centre of sociological humour studies, describing this laughter as: 'a marker of the shift to the humorous mode and of the acceptance of a joke, an important signal of social acceptance, the expression of a humorous worldview (Bakhtin), and as “the language of humor” (Zijderveld 1983)' (2008.389). She highlights how several recent authors have argued for inclusion of laughter in the sociology of humour, particularly noting Michael Billig (2005), who made laughter central to his theory of humour and embarrassment, seeing laughter basically as derision. His work, and that of various sociologists, will be considered in more detail in chapter six.

With regard to laughter as a response to humour, we now examine the three dominant theories of humour that have long been identified and found widespread acceptance (Nelson, 1990). However, here I draw upon Michael Billig (2005) in tracing their development and history as I now consider these theories in more detail.

1) The *superiority theory* dates back to Aristotle, and is postulated by Plato among others, dominated the philosophical tradition until the eighteenth century (Billig 2005.38), and emphasizes the aggressive feelings that fuel humour, noting there is an intimate relationship between humour and power. It describes all humour as derisive, noting people laugh at the misfortunes of others or themselves, and is therefore a form of ridicule and mockery involving the process of judging, disparaging, or degrading something or someone. Fundamentally scornful, laughter is defined in the context of power over and aggression against a victim, and seen as less than wholesome, which Morreal noted makes humour ethically suspect (1987.3). Billig thinks whilst this is out of tune with ideological positivism, this theory (also known as degradation theory), may offer clues about the maintenance of power, order, and ideological self-deception

(2005.39), and whilst these early theories fall short in explaining the psychology of laughter, they nevertheless succeed in illustrating how humour was bound up with an ideology of order, taste and superiority (2005.47). Other prominent representatives of this theory include Thomas Hobbes (1640), Henri Bergson (1914), and Albert Rapp (1951), each of whom noted that we laugh at situations and people we feel superior to. (Interestingly, Robert Solomon [2002] offers a variant of this in suggesting an *inferiority* theory of humour based in inferiority or modesty, which will be considered in the Literature Review of Jacqueline Bussie's work [2007]).

2) The *incongruity theory*, first touched upon by Aristotle (in *Rhetoric*, an approach favoured by Immanuel Kant and Soren Kierkegaard), maintains humour originates from disharmony or inappropriateness, and roots humour in the ridiculous and its resolution in new meaning (Bergson, 1914). Developed in the eighteenth century as a reaction against Hobbes's view of laughter, Billig notes this theory seeks to identify those incongruous features of the world that provoke laughter (2005.57), highlighting how eighteenth-century theorists viewed 'wit' as clever verbal sayings, whereas 'humour' denoted a laughable character, in which: 'the incongruity theory looked at laughter's cognitive processes, rather than its emotional dynamics' (2005.62). Focusing on how two different ideas would be suddenly connected with comic effect, this sees laughter as caused by two opposite meanings held at the same time: congruity results from integrating two incongruous ideas, and perception and judgement lead to wit and laughter (2005.64, 65). Bergson argued laughter has its origins in the inability of people to be flexible in thought, behaviour or action. This theory therefore encourages a more flexible approach to life. Arthur Koestler (1964) argued humour involves coexisting incompatible events. His theory focuses on the object of humour, with humour seen as a response to incongruity (and may include ambiguity, logical impossibility, irrelevance, and inappropriateness). Ted Cohen argues laughter can also reflect an acknowledgement and acceptance of powerlessness in an incomprehensible situation, which itself is a form of resistance to that situation (Cohen, 2001). Billig notes how, unlike their eighteenth-century forebears, today's incongruity theorists approach the topic through the analysis of jokes, which embody incongruities and divergent cognitions (2005.66), in which: 'these theories exist within, and take their illustrative meaning from, contexts of class and gender, taste and morality' (2005.68), in which: 'the basis of laughter lies in the juxtaposition of incongruities' (2005.72).

3) The *relief theory* emanated from the nineteenth-century materialist philosophy, in particular from a debate between Herbert Spencer (the first protagonist for this theory type) and Alexander Bain in 1859-60 (Billig, 2005.86). This theory rejects the notion

that either superiority or incongruity are bases for humour; its proponents believe and predict that humour is a form of release from psychological tension, in which laughter relieves physical pressure, and thereby functions as a safety-valve for the individual and society. It focuses on humour relieving not only tension, but anxiety, hostility, aggression, fear, sexual tension, and suppressed desire. Thus humour gratifies repressed feelings which operate on an unconscious level, and releases energy generated by repression. It also helps societal taboos stay in place by occasionally permitting reference to them. Billig suggests its importance lies in bearing the imprint of ideas that have subsequently become crucial to the development of physiological and evolutionary psychology, giving fresh form to the older clash between the theories of superiority and incongruity (2005.86, 87). He notes how the physiology of laughter is rooted in physiological ideas about the excitation and release of nervous energy (2005.91), in which the act of perception triggers complex and multiple excitations within the nervous system, reflexes which Bain noted are: 'performed almost unconsciously' (1865.6) (2005.93). For Bain, such release from constraint produces pleasure and an increase in nervous energy that can result in laughter, but which he linked with degradation, as a momentary release from habitual constraint (1865.250). This led Billig to suggest that the mockery implied can provide momentary freedom (2005.97), a theme which will be considered with regard to the laughter of the oppressed later. Spencer was supported in his thesis by early psychologists such as Dewey and Kline, but perhaps its greatest advocate has been Sigmund Freud in the field of psychoanalysis.

An addition to these three is *play* theory, developed by Max Eastman (1936), in which he finds analogies of humour in the behaviour of animals, and humour as an extension of animal play. This is an ethological approach, tracing humour back through evolutionary development, looking at laughter triggers like tickling, and calling attention to the structural similarities between play contexts and the humorous context: what is true of play, might be true of humour too. Play theory tries to give humour a genus by offering essential differentiating characteristics (www.iep.edu/humor/).

More modern theories of humour are essentially variations of one of the three traditional ones, all of which assume that humour is a universal phenomenon. Of the theories outlined, I favour the incongruity theory when dealing with death, since I suggest death engenders a disharmony and incongruity in the tide of human affairs, which may trigger laughter as a 'word against death'. In this context I acknowledge that the relief theory must also come into play to release the psychological tensions likely to occur around death. I suggest the superiority theory of mocking and derisive laughter is

the predominant aspect found in the Hebrew Bible, and therefore something this thesis needs to address. Post-modern theory has taught us to be suspicious of universalism. Recent theorists such as Gilhus have encouraged a more culture-specific approach to humour (1997.5). Accordingly what is considered humorous will often differ from society to society, whereas laughter seems to be a universal human trait.

Although this thesis will seek to reclaim laughter for the theological project, it will recognise the early Christian theologians were correct to recognise that laughter is not an unambiguous good. Laughter is a phenomenon that can be culturally specific, which can be used to feed a sense of superiority and enforce an unequal social order. It can also be used to degrade and demonise others. We need then to explore what Christ-like laughter may be, and I seek to do this.

Douglas Davies and 'Words Against Death'

I move now to advance the proposition that laughter and humour may be understood in a Christian theological context as what Douglas Davies (*Death, Ritual and Belief,* 1997 and 2002) defines as ‘words against death’. Clearly, this is neither the *only* nor the *principal* way in which laughter and humour can be interpreted, but *one* of the ways. In developing a Christian theology of laughter it is important to identify and define its application within this context.

In his wide-ranging work, Davies examines archaeological discoveries concerning pre-historical death rites. Drawing upon various studies from a wide variety of scholars, Davies seeks to postulate death rites as 'words against death', an adaptation to the fact of death, something that underlies most major world religions, but may incorporate local religious practice. He perceives mortuary ritual as a human adaptive response to death, singling out ritual language as a crucial form of response, a reaction to the awareness of death, and argues religious rituals surrounding death may be understood as 'words against death', the means whereby death is never allowed to have the last word (2002.1). His 'words against death' are employed not only to cope with the fact of death, but even to triumph over it, in order to gain cultural energy to motivate ongoing life. Such rites are used here as a positive cultural resource (2002.3, 4). 'Words against death' are employed here not only to cope with the fact of death, but even to triumph over it: 'the ongoing power of human existence [endures] despite death's ravages', such 'words against death': 'reflect the self-consciousness of the living, whilst asserting belief in an immortal soul, and the continuity of the identity of the dead through their heirs and successors' (2002.3, 4, 5).

Drawing upon Philippe Aries' important interpretation of how death has been perceived and experienced over a thousand years of European history, Davies suggests religion has been a powerful and influential factor in the historic traditions that addressed human mortality in previous generations, with their various death rites described by Aries as a: 'defence of society against untamed nature', whereby: 'the ritualization of death is a special aspect of the total strategy of man against nature' (Aries, 1991.603,604). Whilst Davies criticizes this as setting human culture against animal nature in too stark a form, and Freudian in the association of death with sex (2002.4,5), nonetheless, Davies considers what Aries suggests here resembles his own focus on 'words against death' as a response and adaptation to the fact of death, part of the environment in which we live (2002. viii,1): 'death rites influence and change human identity as ... self-consciousness, challenged by mortality, responds in its own defence through literal and metaphorical “words against death” … [where] death is problematic precisely because it is intrinsically part of the human condition, with “words against death” reflecting upon this self-consciousness' (2002.4,5). Interestingly, whilst Davies thinks this self-consciousness is intimately linked with a sense of identity which cannot entertain the idea of its own cessation (2002.5), the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre asserted: 'death is always beyond my subjectivity', and as something: 'in no way an ontological structure of my being … it is the Other who is mortal in his being' (1957.546).

Davies's work also explores the notion of 'offending death', suggesting the use of rhetoric has assumed increasing significance in framing human death activity, by embracing many forms apparent in numerous social contexts, including stories that evoke the identity of the dead as told by their family and friends (2002.2). Through formal theologies and philosophies, Davies considers these 'words against death' are expressed in books and lectures, which may also pass into the public domain through the verbal form of prayer, blessing, invocation, eulogies and orations, etc. Allied to music, they gain great power in liturgical hymns and psalms, while as architectural memorials, he suggests they assume a durable public profile (Davies, 1997.1). ‘Human beings muster as they seek to live with a hope for the future' (1997.viii), in which Davies sees grief as that human emotion which: 'expresses death's rupturing of relationships raising issues of identity and social continuity', that: 'human cultures have universally asserted that something of the individual continues after death', and that these death rites are a means of: 'encouraging a commitment to life despite the fact of death', in which the verbal power of such rites expresses human triumph over death (2002.6). He writes:

> The creativity of human imagination has not left *death* to itself, uncommented upon, unaddressed. Through literature, film, art and architecture, death has been framed so as not to leave the last word with mortality. . . In a sense the sacred books of world religions also resemble the popular media of film and television in providing an objective focus for reflection on the fact of death. While there are obvious differences between the tradition of supernatural authority vested in sacred texts and the much more transient nature of modern media and popular culture, both foster public discussion of human worth in the face of death. (Davies, 1997.196)

Davies believes humanity deploys its most powerful weapon of language; language uses rites as a powerful conveyance in rising to defy death, since death challenges human identity and besieges social destiny (2002.7). His 'words against death' are seen as necessary to repulse the negative feature of death (in which corpses represent the negative domain of physical existence), replacing them with aspects that symbolise the ongoing and positive nature of human identity, thereby highlighting this apparent paradox which exists between physical mortality and social eternity (2002.7). Peter Berger (1967) perceives death rites as one means of keeping members of society 'reality-orientated', with language and ritual emphasizing human belief in the triumph of humanity over death, asserting the plausibility of existence (1967.33). Davies suggests such language influences and directs emotion and mood, especially during critical moments in life (such as death), that such words and actions conjoin in a performative utterance against death, and may therefore achieve this goal (2002.8), citing Durkheim as seeing these as providers of increased courage and ardour, giving a sense of hope in life rather than fear in death, and Malinowski as ritualizing optimism, a shared hope of survival in which communal support overcomes the sense of hopelessness in loss (2002.15,16).

Davies' work is not without its critics, such as M.Purcell in *Studies in World Christianity* (2002, Vol. 8, Issue 2, pp.322-323), and especially Terence Turner in *Anthropology* (2005, Vol. 34, Issue 3, pp.248-256). Purcell considers Davies' work to be wide in scope, often anecdotal rather than presenting a structural argument, and containing little exposition, interpretive engagement, or rhetoric. Turner (Professor of Anthropology at Cornell University), in a more comprehensive criticism, considers Davies has not produced a connected argument in his book, which he thinks is relatively diffuse and unfocused in character, and lacks rationale or conceptional development (2005.250). Turner asserts: 'In Davies' argument, anthropology is thus called to stand in as a kind

of secular scripture, offering grounds for hope and “commitment to life” despite the fact of biological death' (2005.249). He considers that Davies' assertions are inconsistent with the anthropological evidence, leading to predictable difficulties, where: 'Davies treats the supposedly universal idea of the survival of personal consciousness after death as ipso facto consistent with Christian religious notions of immortality as a kind of victory over death' (2005.250), indicative to Turner of Christian humanist assumptions, and not in accord with much of the ethnographic record. Turner comments:

> Davies is able to avoid the appearance of inconsistency between his theoretical assumptions and the comparative ethnographic evidence primarily because his interpretative apparatus is couched in such vague terms that it can be made to fit even the most apparently recalcitrant instances. … His treatment of ethnographic examples and anthropological theories, with a few exceptions, is extensive and descriptive rather than intensive or analytical. (2005.250, 251)

In considering Davies’ ‘‘theory’’ of ‘‘words against death’’, Turner thinks the phenomenon it purports to describe being: 'grounded in a hope that human individual personality may continue in a pleasant afterlife', which is clear enough in the context of Christian attitudes to death and common English speech, but highlights this does not correspond with the attitudes towards death expressed in many non-Christian cultures, or indeed even within folk cultures and political movements in Christian countries. He suggests these: 'do not so much speak ‘‘against’’ death but of varying ways of accommodating to it, accepting it, or using it, while taking a wide variety of attitudes toward the dead themselves' (2005.251). This leads Turner to identify:

> A major problem with Davies’ formula, from a comparative anthropological perspective, is his failure to grasp the significance of the distinction between death and the dead as objects of mortuary ritual … (which) may simultaneously express opposite views, attitudes, or beliefs toward these different entities, … (and thus be) the opposite of participating in a process of ‘‘triumph over death’’ or a prelude to some beneficent afterlife of the deceased'. (2005.253, 254)

Whilst Turner's criticism of Davies and reservations concerning 'words against death' as inappropriate with regard to non-Christian cultures are clearly legitimate, I would argue Davies' proposition nonetheless remains applicable regarding Christian attitudes and beliefs, as I suggest there is sufficient evidence in Davies' work to justify that Christian funerary rites and rituals are suitable vehicles for what he defines as 'words against death'. Further, I argue Davies' definition can be broadened within a Christian

perspective of dealing with the central questions of human existence, and thereby incorporation within a theology of laughter to include humour and laughter as 'words against death', never allowing death to have the last word, either resulting in its dissolution or by weakening its sting. Clearly in seeking to advance this view, I do so inevitably within the context of contemporary Western culture and heritage, readily acknowledging (as Turner reminds us) this may not necessarily pertain within other traditions and cultures, where perceptions of death and post-mortem existence (and associated funerary rhetoric and mortuary rites) can be entirely different.

My specific criticism of Davies arises from the way he appears to see 'words against death' as primarily employed by the living as a defence mechanism against death, in order to come to terms with the fact of death, and the loss of the 'other'. I would question whether Davies considers 'words against death' are only of specific benefit to the living and the society remaining. It seems to me that Davies isn't really talking about the afterlife or individual life after death within the context of religious faith, and by focusing on contemporary secular 'words against death', as a trained anthropologist and theologian, he almost avoids it.

Whilst Davies suggests that death never has the last word, and through religious ritual and secular rites, in words, music, architecture and art, people express trust in hope over fear, I suggest that laughter becomes a word against death that also expresses the triumph of life over death and its power to diminish humanity and turn us into dust. I would assert that in certain instances amongst those he lists in the categories he defines (expanded by this thesis to also incorporate and include humour and laughter), such 'words against death' may not only benefit the living, but also the dead, in whatever hoped for and anticipated post-mortem existence a particular society or religious faith group perceives. For it seems to me in many earlier cultures, what Davies defines as 'words against death', were also employed by the living for the specific benefit of the dead, as evidenced in archaeological finds of grave goods, foods, and even slaves buried with the deceased in tombs and sepulchres for anticipated service in the future afterlife. And Davies was aware of this!

Davies considers through human imagination there is both a drive for survival, and a propensity for hopeful optimism, which seemingly contradict the usual facts of life. In the face of death most human societies have asserted some kind of post-mortem life continues in another realm, albeit in a spiritual dimension or amongst the ancestral powers, and it is not just in the afterlife that death is transcended, but also for those who remain, where the funeral rites can make it possible to lift the living above the

realm of death and decay (Davies, 1997.146). However, I would suggest in some cultures traditional beliefs regarding these rituals can also have the opposite effect, as for example in the ancient Greek understanding of the afterlife, the Christian concept of purgatory or of hell, in the fire envisaged in Islamic teaching, or the multiple realms in Buddhist and Hindu thought and belief, all of which have their fearful aspects, which confirms some of the criticism Turner makes of Davies. But overall I support Davies' supposition, for I argue humour and laughter can play a part as 'words against death', by doing just that, lifting the hearts of the living above the realm of death and decay.

Humorous incidents recalled of shared experiences, and the idea that the deceased is looking down sharing still the same laughter in the heavenly realm, which seems fairly common currency in today's funerals, may lack any theological underpining, but can be of comfort to many (although comfort may not be a sufficient criterion of truth!). By way of example, in *Does God LOL?* (ed. F. Mulgrew, 2013), Katie Mulgrew suggests laughter is hope, that God laughs at the sheer ridiculousness of situations in daily life, noting: 'human beings have the most extraordinary gift to use laughter as a survival tool', and how friends who have suffered heartbreak and enormous loss will joke in the face of their circumstances, commenting: 'How brilliant is that? To laugh right in death's stupid face' (2013.41). She writes: 'To me laughter is hope. It is the most visual and audible expression of hope that any human can express' (2013.42).

Social anthropologist Kate Fox (2004) notes there are clear limits to the use of humour in English funerals. Fox sees having a Christian funeral of some sort – usually Church of England – as the automatic 'default' option for the English, and *not* having a Christian funeral requires a determined effort, a clear notion of exactly what one wants instead (2004.353,354). Fox notes: 'the English do not go in for extravagant weeping and wailing at funerals', which are occasions reflecting a curious ambivalence in our attitude towards ritual, on the one hand an intense need for the rules and formalities of ritual, whilst at the same time finding these ceremonies embarrassing and uncomfortable (2004.359). Fox comments:

> We find solemnity discomforting, and somehow faintly ridiculous; the most serious, formal, earnest bits of important ceremonies have an unfortunate tendency to make us want to laugh. This is an uneasy, nervous sort of laughter, a close relation of our knee-jerk humour reflex. Humour is our favourite coping mechanism, and laughter is our standard way of dealing with our social dis-ease. (2004.374)

Fox believes the English have a problem with funerals because:

> There are few rites of passage on Earth as stilted, uncomfortable and excruciatingly awkward as a typical English funeral. At funerals we are deprived of our primary social coping mechanism – our usual levels of humour and laughter being deemed inappropriate on such an officially sad occasion. At other times, we joke constantly about death, as we do about anything that frightens or disturbs us, but funerals are the one time when humour – or at least any humour beyond that which raises a wry, sad smile – would be disrespectful and out of place. Without it, we are left naked, unprotected, our social inadequacies exposed for all to see. (2004.374, 375)

Fox's comment about the use of jokes and laughter as the English favourite and primary social coping mechanisms are apposite here with regard to death, providing further evidence of their use by the English as 'words against death'; their absence leaving us: 'naked, unprotected, our social inadequacies exposed for all to see'. Without laughter as a 'word against death', the English are left unprotected with our dis-ease and discomfort readily exposed. Clearly English restraint, decorum, and polite unease are more socially acceptable and expected. Fox says:

> Denied the use of our humour reflex, we seem horribly vulnerable, as though some vital social organ has been removed – which in effect it has. Humour is an essential, hard-wired element of the English character that forbidding (or severely restricting) its use is the psychological equivalent of amputating our toes – we simply cannot function socially without humour. … At funerals we are left bereft and helpless. No irony! No mockery! No teasing! No banter! No humorous understatement! No jokey wordplay or *double entendres*! How the hell are we supposed to communicate? (2004.375)

Fox here acknowledges the importance of humour and laughter in the social realm in a way in which they could well be applied as 'words against death', were it not for the traditional characteristic of reserve - the 'stiff upper lip' phenomenon for which the English seem renowned. With regard to funerals Fox says:

> Not only is humour drastically restricted, but earnestness, normally tabooed, is actively prescribed. … Tears are permitted; a bit of quiet, unobtrusive sobbing and sniffing is acceptable … (but anything else) would here be regarded as undignified and inappropriate' (2004.375).The prohibition on humour, the

> suspension of the earnestness taboo and the tear-quotas make English funerals a highly unpleasant business. We are required to switch off our humour reflex, express emotions we do not feel, and suppress most of those we do feel. On top of all this, the English regard death itself as rather embarrassing and unseemly, something we prefer not to think or talk about. Our instinctive response to death is a form of denial – we try to ignore it and pretend it is not happening, but this is rather hard to do at a funeral (2004.377).

According to Fox, only at the post-ceremony gathering is some gentle humour finally permitted, and perhaps at that stage rather too late for laughter and humour to be as effective and beneficial as a ‘word against death’.

One of the changes, perhaps in part arising from post-modernism, but also from the HIV/AIDS epidemic which hit the gay community from the 1980s, is the concept of the queering of death suggested by Elizabeth Stuart (2002), where twenty minutes at the crematorium for an impersonal characterless traditional service proved inadequate, and a ‘celebration of life’ became more normative, notably in the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales. Here, anecdotes concerning the deceased may find humour playing a prominent role, together with favourite music, and poetry and prose, with usually far less emphasis on the funeral as the sacramental means by which the soul is transported to the afterlife.

As Davies acknowledges, humour and death can go hand in hand, and I would argue that in such circumstances humour and laughter can and do provide for us suitable and appropriate 'words against death', even in the midst of what, after all, is a very serious business. But as a ‘word against death’, I agree with Davies such a Christian theology of laughter would not apply where laughter and humour are used and uttered maliciously, but could do when used earnestly with that philosophical and religious seriousness that can enable us to challenge death itself. This seems to me a necessary corrective, which supports its use as a ‘word against death’. Davies feels religion should be capable of offering hope and comfort in a way that similar 'life-focused funerals' cannot; even secular patterns of funeral ritual help people gain a sense of the significance of the life that is ended and, importantly, of life in the broader sense, and that: ‘for people whose self-identity is associated with the imagination and its flourishing through literature or artefact, it is to be expected that novel vehicles will be drawn upon to deal with death in a non-religious world’ (1997.237).

Davies seems to follow the earlier approach adopted by Harvey Cox with explicit reference to laughter. Although not referring to death, Cox referred to laughter as ‘hope’s last weapon’, arguing Christians who laugh are making a statement that the world and its suffering do not have the last word (Cox, 1969).

Methodology

This thesis is in substantial part a work of historical theology in that it seeks to examine theological approaches to laughter as they have emerged in the Christian Church in their socio-cultural and theological contexts. Anthony Towey (2013) describes theology as: 'thoughtful conversation about God' where 'God speculation' has been apparent from the dawn of humanity to the present day, but basically suggests: 'Reality is best understood as God-based'. Towey divides this overview into four phases: The Ancient Heritage (Old Testament), the New Testament, the Classical Period, and the Contemporary Era (2013.xv), each of which will receive consideration. His work describes how the meta-narrative of Christian theology has emerged from its ancient roots through to its contemporary expression today, describing this theology as: 'a conversation across time' (2013.18).

Traditional historical theology draws upon the rich historical expression of Christian faith as an ongoing resource in a continuing 'open conversation' theological enquiry between believers and events of every era, clearly drawing extensively upon the biblical material as determined in the Canon of scripture, and on those other basic articulations of the contents of the Christian faith, the Creeds, and upon the early Fathers and Church Councils, as well as other appropriate theological sources. Towey points out: 'Christian theology questions its source and is engaged in a permanent, ever-new critical and creative dialogue with lived experience' (2013.13). These early roots and sources are important, as C. K. Chesterton remarked, concerning theologians, needing to be mindful of one group that is readily ignored, namely the dead (Chesterton [1908] 1996.63, noted by Towey 2013.9). Clearly we need reminding regularly that such theologians all made important and foundational contributions towards Christian understanding and theology.

Historical theology as a methodology is therefore attentive to the key sources and contextual origins that gave rise to Christian thinking, open to dialogue with both past and present scholars and scholarship, and encompassing a Christian meta-narrative Towey describes as rooted in the world-view of a scriptural tradition, emphasizing the importance of interpretation (hermeneutics), with *different interpretation* of the biblical

evidence leading to *different theologizing*, in which different 'interpretation communities' may cohere around different theological priorities and core markers of belonging (2013.13). In this, Towey suggests the necessity of a preliminary acceptance of the possibility of paradox, where any apparent contradiction may be resolved by deeper reflection, where 'both/and' thinking is crucial to Christian reasoning, and paradox is one of its governing principles (2013.14). As a methodology, historical theology is therefore mindful of history, contextual interpretation, and the possibility of paradox. Bearing this in mind, we need to consider how the foundational documents of Christian theology connect to interpretive issues in historical theology. Clearly New Testament writings, especially the gospels and Paul's letters, provide the intellectual basis for the whole Christian theological project. How to interpret the Jesus of the gospels is a fundamental feature behind all Christian theology.

Graham Stanton (2002) provides a comprehensive overall view of the multi-layered interpretation of Jesus of Nazareth in the gospels, noting: ‘In reading or interpreting any writing, whether ancient or modern, the first step must always be to determine what kind or genre of writing it is’, and claiming we instinctively compare whatever literature we have before us with similar writings (2002.13). Such stories are a staple of human life, none more so than those we find within the pages of the biblical narrative, where David Gunn and Danna Fewell (1993) note that such stories order and reorder our experience, reflecting a given culture, and are often ‘performative’ rather than simply explanatory. They can give meaning to life, highlighting how: ‘the Jewish community constantly reaffirms its identity by retelling the Passover story from Exodus’ (1993.1). Robert Alter (1990) focuses on the mechanisms of narrative which have opened up: ‘precisely what are the various options, and combination and permutations of options, for telling a story’ (1990.171). While his work concerns the literary-critical possibilities for reading the Hebrew Bible, I suggest this can equally apply to the New Testament, and other texts considered here.

There is clearly a need to be aware of the nature of any written material considered, and with scriptural material, to consider, for example, whether it is biography, history, religious propaganda, or something else. We may rightly question what definition best describes a gospel, whether intended as a biographically accurate record of Jesus’ life, historically reliable, written by eyewitnesses. Justin Martyr in *Dialogue with Trypho* describes them as: ‘memoirs of the apostles’. Clement of Alexandria saw John as inspired by the Spirit (who accordingly composed a ‘spiritual’ gospel). Or they could perhaps be seen more as a theological treatise cast very loosely in a narrative framework. Here it may be that the evangelist was, perhaps, simply an editor or

compiler of a collection of traditional anthologies, shaped by the life and faith of early Christians, primarily concerned with proclamation, gospels intended for oral performance, not texts for academic study. There have been a variety of approaches to reading these texts over two millennia, with Alter favouring a 'literary approach' to the texts, although Gunn and Fewell remind us that: 'Meaning is always, in the last analysis, the reader's creation, and readers, like texts, come in an infinite variety' (1993.xi), suggesting that in reading the biblical narrative, arguably there is perhaps no 'correct' interpretation discernible.

Notwithstanding this, historical criticism became the dominant method of biblical interpretation in the Western world for over a century. In the nineteenth century the gospels were often assumed to be biographies containing accurate historical record; some scholars even produced imaginative reconstructions of the hidden years of Jesus' childhood. A problem here is that ancient and modern conventions in biographical writing differed markedly. Stanton suggests the gospels should be read against the backdrop of their times, that early Christian readers of the synoptic gospels would have read them as biography, and whilst John's gospel is markedly different, it nonetheless belongs within the same tradition (2002.17).

Form criticism developed in the early twentieth century to look at the traditions that lay behind the gospels, and whether they are profound theological writings, rather than straightforward historical accounts. Here in this model the evangelist is seen as an anthologist responsible for gathering original independent oral tradition (2002.27). Stanton notes how Rudolf Bultmann perceived the risen Christ as central to Christian faith and to the missionary preaching of the early Church, and not the historical Jesus at all, where the significance of Jesus was 'not his story' (2002.16). Where the evangelists are seen as authors, redaction criticism looks for evidence that they may have modified and reshaped some of the traditions at their disposal, with composition criticism evaluating the overall structure employed, looking for evidence of sections and sub-sections, and the order in which they are constructed.

Literary criticism focuses on the gospels as stories, using the literary genre for interpretation, sometimes employing narrative criticism and reader-response criticism as tools to examine the text. Whilst recognising story elements in the gospels, Stanton affirms that the gospels are not seen as 'windows' enabling us (after careful historical reconstruction) to 'see' the teaching of Jesus or the make-up of the community for whom a particular evangelist is writing, but rather the text is a 'mirror' in which readers 'see' the world in which they themselves live (2002.32). As a result Stanton suggests

historical reconstruction still has a part to play, and that historical studies remain essential with regard to first-century religious and cultural settings, but that these are now complemented by literary criticism (2002.34), affirming: ‘In the interpretation of the gospels the intention of the evangelists must be taken seriously’ (2002.36). Stanton says whilst modern studies of the gospels have been dominated by redaction criticism, Mark is now seen as a story teller, not simply as a compiler of traditions grouped by themes, but as an author of a lively dramatic story with several major turning-points and climaxes, which Matthew and Luke have subsequently reshaped and reinterpreted (2002.40), an assessment with which I concur.

These various considerations inevitably come into play through my drawing upon the work of various specialist theologians and biblical scholars within the context of the chapters examining the Old Testament, New Testament, and Gnostic texts, where my approach will be to focus more on a narrative critical methodology in dealing with the gospels and other texts. My approach intends to be a reconstructive piece of working, rescuing Christian reflection on laughter down the centuries from relative obscurity, but also to be revisionist in suggesting that it is possible to have a positive Christian theology of laughter that can function as a ‘word against death’ and constructive in offering a new theology of laughter. A Christian theology of laughter may be justified in a view that theology is a good interpreter of life. Nothing is beyond a theological assessment. I wish to state that this is my methodological approach to the phases of laughter found in the myriad and diverse patterns of human experience.

It has to be acknowledged that there are inevitable dangers and weaknesses in a historical theology methodology as far as laughter is concerned. The course of historical theology follows a pattern of controversy between different sections of the Church, as for example in the early Church Councils (and especially I suggest in its dealings with Gnostic literature and beliefs), the divisions of 1054 CE between Rome and Orthodoxy concerning the use of the Filioque clause inserted into the Nicene Creed, and that occurring between Catholic (Rome) and the fragmented views and varieties of Protestantism during the Reformation period, when solutions to these controversies was sought. Although we need to examine the Christian theological tradition, and how advances were made in various theological positions arising from debate and desired solutions, the development of a distinctive Christian theology of laughter is not going to reflect point-by-point any such parallel advance. This is in part due to the fact that laughter never featured as a serious area of theological debate in the development of Christian tradition. And yet my view is that nonetheless the need to deal with laughter as a basic feature of human existence cannot legitimately be left out,

given that Jesus of Nazareth is fully human according to the early Church Councils, as affirmed by the Council of Chalcedon 451 CE. Perhaps the post-Enlightenment focus on the human and subjective in the theological tradition, now more than ever, requires a serious attempt to be made concerning laughter and its application in the face of death.

In order to establish a viable Christian theology of laughter, it will be necessary to review critically the major elements of laughter as constructed through the historical process of handling comedy from its beginnings in the ancient world, in biblical literature (the foundational Christian documents), in so-called Gnostic texts, in the Renaissance and Reformation period, and into the modern and post-modern worlds. Having done that, it may be possible to formulate a theology of laughter which will be a necessary re-dressing of the rather humourless presentation of the gospel message in the Church today, and to equip it with this theology of laughter to confront and challenge death as a last word in our short and mortal human life.

Post-modernism has given the lie to the notion of both the neutral scholar and the neutral history. As history is generally written by the victors, this is no less true of Christian history than of any other. I believe this is relevant, when, for example, considering ancient Gnosticism and its insights into humour and laughter from a religious perspective. So I will be taking this aspect of early Christian belief into consideration in the chapters examining the biblical material, with a view to looking for evidence of humour and laughter from that tradition that might be drawn upon to help us identify a Christian theology of laughter.

All historical readings are necessarily selective, and it is not always easy to get behind those readings to the debates that lie below the surface. It is important to note that I am not seeking to construct a definitive theology of laughter, but to suggest the possibility of one approach which is positive (while recognising that laughter can be ambivalent and not always an essentially positive reaction), in a historical context where a negative attitude to laughter has at times dominated, and in a current context where laughter is largely marginalised in the theological project. It is important to have a careful examination of fundamental biblical material, the development of the Christian tradition from the time of the early Church theologians, through the Medieval and Reformation periods, and into the modern age. This will necessitate looking at current scholarship as it relates to these themes, selecting authors whose work deals with laughter and humour within a religious context, and those who have presented a use of laughter as a ‘word against death’ where Douglas Davies’ work is considered foundational, whilst

also analysing and evaluating the contributions of Richard Cote, Karl-Josef Kuschel, Ingvild Gilhus, Jacqueline Bussie, Mikhael Bakhtin and Michael Screech, the major thinkers in this particular field.

Laughter is intrinsic to being human; it is a fact of our human make-up. And when nothing in life makes us laugh, we pay performers to ensure we do laugh. Perhaps it is not the mechanism of laughter which matters, but rather how this biological mechanism is made manifest. People may have been inclined to laugh in the mockery of Jesus in his passion, because the Christ becomes the performer. He constructs in his drama a trigger that facilitates a flow of laughter from his spectators. The raw solemnity of the Atonement is twisted from the sacred to that of being a show on a stage. So laughter permeates everything. Even the sublime is contrasted with the sorrow, and both effect the mechanism which leads to the same response.

Karl-Josef Kuschel in *Laughter: A Theological Reflection* (1994) is seemingly at pains to add laughter to the storehouse of theological debate by his categorising descriptions. And some of this needs unpacking - how would one define ‘proud laughter’ against ‘healing laughter’, for example. Laughter can be an experience of isolation: an unleashing of pent-up energy, or it can be a shared experience. But even in the latter case, it would simply be a singular experience if not sufficiently evoking a response of identification with others, or another. And it could be construed that singular laughter is synonymous with inherent psychological disorders as the stimulus is internally charged. Kuschel does admit that a theology of laughter is inappropriate as it may distract from the Christ-focused spirit. But my methodology will set out to demonstrate that laughter, even in its connection with Christianity, with all the spiritual and moralistic elements found in the faith, need not be subject to mere intellectualism. This is Kuschel’s problem. He further believes that there may be a problem with laughter, believing the root of the problem is discoverable with the Ancients: the classicists of Greece. He even introduces a concept of European laughter. But if his basic premise is that there is such a legitimacy to be found as is suggested by the concept of ‘the laughter of God’, then laughter is far too boundless and universal to be classified or to be subjected to cultural scrutiny. My methodology approaches all this differently, without adopting the views of the others who have dealt with this subject, save inasmuch as recognising their contributions to the whole discourse. And my approach is both interpretive and partially selective in analysing such contributions.

Every written history, poetry, prose, or scientific analysis encompasses a theological perspective, but perhaps the real essence may sometimes be found behind the

outward expression, for in a sense laughter is the result of quirks or qualities inherent to the human psyche, a phenomenon which the great religions of the world have always recognised as having both an inner and outer dimension, effectively transcending both these dimensions. So in this debate I wish my methodology to appraise the so-called Gnostic dimension, which very few scholars have treated sufficiently concerning the subject of laughter. My conjecture is that writing from a Christian-orthodox perspective alone, such knowledge is of necessity limited, given the constraints of an inherited theological base; or implies a view that the field is too dangerous or mercurial to incorporate. Found among the Greek mystery cults, Zoroastrianism and the Kabbala of Judaism, Gnosticism was understood as a religious philosophical dualism that professed salvation through secret knowledge or *gnosis*. It could be argued that in the Christian religion, Gnosticism played a vital role in its close identity with the hidden human spirit, unbounded by time and space, and the world of manifestation and form. In other words, the real could only be found in actuality, behind the masks of an outward form. Laughter, similarly, might be considered the manifestation of a hidden or inner trigger. The denouncing of Gnosticism by the early Church theologians gave way to an orthodoxy that has characterised Christian thought until modern times, but their attitude towards laughter may be instructive.

In chapter one I will critically review the key literature relating to Christian theology and laughter. I then seek to provide a thorough and comprehensive review of all the available evidence of laughter and humour in the Bible as fundamental and foundational in this particular research project. Chapter two provides an introduction and scene setting, focusing on the anthropomorphic descriptions of God, and I will critically analyse the episodes in the Hebrew scriptures where laughter is apparent, both positive and affirming, as well as mocking and derisive, before drawing some initial conclusions. Chapter three follows a similar pattern examining the New Testament writings, before I will review examples of laughter found within the Gnostic texts from that early New Testament period, finally summarising my conclusions concerning the laughter evidenced in these various texts.

In chapter four I will trace such attitudes to laughter in the life of the Church from the time of the early theologians, reviewing evidence for the condemnation of laughter during that period through the writings of Evagrius, John Climacus, John Chrysostom, and Augustine of Hippo, before briefly considering evidence from the monastic rules of Anthony of Egypt and Benedict of Nursia. I shall then consider sources which evidenced laughter and humour within Medieval Christian life, in particular laughter and joy at the Easter Feast, the anarchic laughter during the ‘Feast of Fools’, when

contrasted with the comedy in the Corpus Christi Feast with its associated mystery plays as it was celebrated in England. This chapter will then trace the gradual rehabilitation of laughter through the work and insights of some of the Renaissance period scholars, such as Erasmus and Rabelais.

Chapter five will look at laughter and its role and function in modernity and post-modernity from a religious perspective (focusing on Umberto Eco's 1980 novel *The Name of the Rose*, and Bakhtin's insights into the laughter of carnival and the grotesque (based on the comic literary works of the Renaissance scholar Rabelais), before examining the relationship between laughter and theology in the modern age as seen by various scholars, and assessing its place in religious life. Chapter six considers the sociology of humour and laughter, the theology of liberation, and Jacqueline Bussie's work on 'the laughter of the oppressed'. In chapter seven I move towards seeking to define and apply a theology of laughter, looking specifically at that positive theology proposed by Cote and Kuschel, but balancing this with the negative theology proposed by Bussie, whilst also considering the 'Laughing Jesus' of Gnosticism, the role of the grotesque in laughter and death, and a consideration of laughter and humour as 'words against death'. In chapter eight I will draw some conclusions from the research I have undertaken.

CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

St Teresa of Avila: 'What would happen if we hid what little sense of humour we had? Let each of us humbly use this to cheer others' (quoted in *Does God LOL?* 2013.57).

There have been very few academic studies of the theology of laughter, or indeed, of the relationship between laughter and religion more generally. What has been written can be categorized into two types of literature: surveys of previous religious or theological engagement with laughter, what we might term reconstructive literature, and attempts to construct new theologies of laughter drawing upon and interacting with this tradition.

Although we will be consulting many authors in this thesis with regard to their expertise in various fields, for example the biblical commentators, and individual novelists (such as Umberto Eco) whose work includes some examination of laughter, I will be focusing attention on specific scholars whose major work has addressed the dimension of comedy and laughter in the contexts of either Christian theology or modern society. In this chapter I will be reviewing the literature relevant to this particular field of research, in order to reconstruct the evidence for examining laughter and humour within the Jewish and Christian traditions, before looking at those whose work may help us to identify and construct new theologies of laughter.

Reconstructing Laughter in Religion

Ingvild Gilhus in her introduction to *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religions* (1997) notes religion seriously addresses questions of ultimate concern, and that laughter is mostly unserious. Whilst in theory religion and laughter should not go well together, she considers there is scarcely a religion that does not include laughter in one form or another, whether it be in myths, rituals or theological treatises, noting how: 'In many religions, laughing gods, tricksters, holy fools, carnivals, comedies and clowning are stock in trade. The ludicrous makes a travesty of the sacred; when, for a short while, laughter sweeps away the holy cosmos, the divine order is exposed as an arbitrary construct' (1997.1).

Gilhus provides an overview of laughter within the context of the history of religion from the Ancient Near East and Classical Greece cultures, from Rome, the Hellenistic culture through early and Medieval Western Christianity, through to present-day

Modernity and Post-modern mythology, a tracing of laughter through religions during more than two thousand years. Gilhus argues each of these periods and cultures, and the religions which they have generated, are distinguished from each other by different world-views with markedly different conceptions of human beings and the human body, revealing three interpretive contexts for laughter's distinctive cultural and religious roles, noting also how the symbolic and religious uses of laughter are themselves not static within these different periods (1997.7).

For Gilhus, why humans laugh can be derived from studies of philosophy, psychology, and the social sciences, but she argues existing theories do not capture the subtleties of laughter's relationship to cultural meaning and change, but nonetheless believes they can be useful tools to search for cultural and religious meanings (1997.5). Her work is not a systematic historical survey, but in considering the history of religious laughter from a comparative religious perspective, she finds it difficult to strike a balance between the universal and the cultural, the systematic and the historical, in looking for universal patterns and cultural meanings. Hers is not a theology of laughter as such, but her work and analysis provide a useful grounding in tracing the roots from which such a theology of laughter may be developed. Whilst she suggests there was a theology of laughter apparent in the early church, this is not outlined at all, and could have been usefully explored and unpacked. As I found with the work of some of the other scholars I draw upon, huge generalisations about these great periods of time are made, which are potentially problematic, highly selective, and either controversial, or open to question. For example if one reads some classical authors such as Caesar, Sallust, Livy, Tacitus or Greek historians and dramatists (e.g. Aristophanes), one feels that the kind of generalisation made by some of the authors would not stand up, so a degree of scholarly hermeneutical suspicion and historical caution is an important consideration to bear in mind.

In reviewing theories of laughter and the contexts where religious laughter is to be found, Gilhus seeks to address the problems faced regarding laughter in early and Medieval Christianity, seeing this as a long-standing attempt to divide the ethereal disembodied cerebral spirit from the earthy carnal body (i.e. of orifices and excretions). However, in modernity and post-modernity, Gilhus perceives evidence for some reconciliation and recovery, primarily tracing this through Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on carnival and utopian laughter (emphasizing the earthiness of the grotesque and excremental nature of the human body), as found within a community and cultural context (1997.6). Although largely lost through the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment periods, using Bakhtin's thesis and post-modern mythology, Gilhus

emphasizes recent recovery of the importance of the body in our response to laughter, concluding that therapeutic laughter is now characteristic of the modern period, noting whilst regenerative laughter may appear as utopian and chaotic, derisive laughter may take the form of blasphemy (1997.135).

Gilhus analyses how laughter has been used as a symbol in myths, rituals and festivals of Western religions (primarily Christianity), as discerned in religious discourse, but seeks to investigate a sign: ‘the laughter forever caught in culture and preserved’, focusing on previous writings concerning laughter within the context of religion’ (1997.1). This suggests that laughter thrives in religions, with its inherent ambiguity making it an apt expression for religious experience and a powerful religious symbol, believing that comical forms have thus far been given insufficient attention by researchers. Thus Gilhus treats laughter as a central human phenomenon, one which erupts in religions with irresistible power, and can be applied by people as a means to experience the world, to categorize its forms, and to judge its values. Her suggestion here seems to me very abstract, and I am not sure that laughter in Buddhism and Islam erupts with irresistible power in quite this way, and there is clearly a danger in trying to use religions to find universal patterns applicable to all situations.

Gilhus draws attention to the laughter of derision and of regeneration in the gods of the Ancient Near East (1997.14-22), laughter touching upon the ‘unthought’ in the cunning/immortal gods of Greek tradition, and the links between comedy and tragedy found within that culture (1997.28-42), but here I am not quite sure how this would work in, for example, the plays of Aristophanes, where the gods are held up to ridicule. After considering the critics of laughter and evidence for critical laughter within the Roman period (1997.43-59), she highlights the anarchy of carnival laughter, where, for a short and defined time, the ruling hierarchies and authorities and social distinctions are overturned, and the grotesque and the earthy carnal bodily and communal laughter of Medieval Christianity was allowed to come to the fore (1997.87, 88), noting how the embodied laughter of the period gradually gave way to a re-emphasis from body to mind with the onset of the Reformation (1997.96-99).

Gilhus considers laughter's religious credibility and use have changed dramatically over the past century, highlighting new ways of thinking inspired by the religions of the East (such as the deep spirituality detected in the enigmatic smiles of the Buddha, or the belly laughs of the Zen monks), which she believes have influenced the symbols and practices in the West, and in consequence have occasioned a more general rise of interest in laughter within post-modernity (1997.122). However, here I would point out

that to the Buddhist, his smile is not considered enigmatic, but as a peaceful expression of wisdom, compassion, and loving kindness, and the belly laughs of Zen monks are interpreted by her from a very Western perspective. Similarly, I would suggest the contrast she envisages between East and West is a terminology which has been largely deconstructed in modern Religious Studies, to the extent that the advent of globalization and diaspora have created multi-faith societies in many so-called ‘First World’ countries such as our own. In asserting that in the post-modern world across various religions, laughter is now both a permitted and encouraged religious expression, I would concur with her analysis, but her assertion that laughter has partly moved from its previous context of the individual body, and has risen again as a phenomenon of the mind, whilst at the same time being: 'given a symbolic value in relation to the body and treated as a bodily sign' (1997.138), is open to question. For whilst laughter and humour clearly emanate in the mind, they actually manifest themselves in a spontaneous bodily reaction of both cause and effect, something which cannot be separated or confined merely to the cerebral realm.

Gilhus cautions: 'modern religious laughter is liberation, its *modus vivendi* is therapeutic, but its results are not necessarily either therapeutic or liberating' (1997.138), and fears laughter has again become an object of calculation and control, a phenomenon to be measured and manipulated by psychology, the social sciences and the entertainment industry. Because of its lack of decorum and threat to orderliness, she considers laughter has repeatedly been subjected to critical discourse and systematization (1997.139), noting: ‘It has been a subject of scientific inquiry at least since the time of Plato. Greek philosophers restricted it. Christian theologians condemned it: the monks and virgins of the early Church in particular had to maintain a serious countenance’ (1997.1). However, here I would note that whilst laughter is part of culture, like blasphemy, its place and function are culturally determined, and whilst laughter and humour may intersect with each other, they do not overlap completely.

Gilhus looks for important symbolic contexts in which laughter appears, one being the human body which, whilst it is certainly a biological entity, is rather more than that, being something conceived of by the human mind, moulded by culture, and used as a religious symbol, suggesting to her: ‘The location and meaning of laughter in a particular religion are closely connected with the religion's symbolic use of the human body, … [and that] the meaning of laughter is connected with the construction and interpretation of the body in religions through the ages’ (1997.3). Thus for Gilhus, the body is seen as a large symbolic system through which thoughts and feelings about humans and their world are played out, that through its surface and openings, the body

connects together the human and non-human worlds, whereby: 'Laughter is a voluntary and extreme opening up of the human body, ... something which pours forth from the body' (1997.3). The point she makes here is important for this thesis, for (in drawing upon Bakhtin's nostalgia for a lost world of carnival and feast), Gilhus emphasizes the role of the body, and harks back to the collective nature of the religious observance as seen in the Medieval period prior to the Reformation. This was an age of piety, of penance, procession, and pilgrimage, where the earthy body of flesh was fully involved in the rites of the Church, both in its sacramental rites, and the celebrations of its Feasts and Festivals, where some licence for humour and laughter was permitted in both fair and carnival, and that the: 'symbolic use of the human body' she suggests was made manifest in all religious practice.

But the sober piety of the Reformation era put pay to this aspect of religious observance within the Protestant or Reformed traditions, where the symbol and colour and enactment of the Catholic Mass, with its associated music and ritual was, to a large extent, replaced by a religion of the book and the rather cerebral nature of the offices of Morning and Evening Prayer. This also became an age for iconoclasm as far as Church interiors were concerned, of drab muted surroundings (mostly devoid of wall paintings and stained glass windows), of long sermons from the pulpit, which together with the clergy stall and the parish clerk's desk replaced the altar as the main focus of the enactment of the worship. It produced circumstances where, for centuries, the body remained mostly still, either sitting or kneeling, with the Protestant emphasis on personal piety a factor to be borne in mind.

The advent of hymn singing (mostly emanating from the nineteenth century), at least gave the occasional excuse and relief to stand to sing them. But in Anglicanism the rise and influence of the Oxford Movement in the nineteenth century, and the recovery and success of the Parish Communion Movement in the twentieth, have resulted in more colour, and greater lay involvement within the context of the liturgy. Whilst disappointingly numbers attending Church have overall diminished in recent decades, there has arisen a greater interest in spirituality, a recovered emphasis once again of signs and symbols, of processions, and pilgrimage, and of 'the religion's symbolic use of the human body', with the body now usually as involved in religious expression as equally as the cerebral mind. And if post-modernism has seen a recovery of laughter, this in turn has begun to influence the Christian churches, and their attitude towards laughter.

The long tradition of the merely cerebral relationship of the individual worshipper and

their personal God, a relationship which linked the human and divine worlds only in the mind, and rarely in the body, is now mostly a thing of the past. We need to acknowledge that we are embodied people, and that therefore a recovery of the use of the body as well as the mind and spirit in our worship can once again properly and joyfully bring laughter to bear within a religious context. However, religions and religious beliefs are traditionally reticent and reluctant to change, something which the introduction of laughter within the context of collective worship may appear to threaten, or be dismissed as being too light-hearted and somehow inappropriate.

Interestingly, Gilhus considers laughter can fill a double function, both signifying a friendly opening up to a community, and/or a hostile closure against outsiders. A congregation may often be assessed by the way it reacts when exchanging the ‘Peace’ (now mostly recovered within the Eucharistic celebration), where formality, reluctance or ‘peace free’ zones may sometimes be observed, and those particular bodies remain intentionally firmly closed. For Gilhus: ‘Laughter explores the world's dividing lines; when laughter strikes out against what is foreign, the better to define its own, it takes the form of ridicule and blasphemy, and becomes a dangerous force’ (1997.4), suggesting: 'What is important about laughter ... is how it appears as a rich symbolic human expression with different modes and meanings' (1997.3, 4). Here I agree with Gilhus, laughter can take many forms indeed, and can sometimes be perceived as dangerous and powerful because of its violent, eruptive character. Laughter does not therefore point to one ultimate meaning, but rather is a sign embracing many different meanings, and in this thesis I claim its use as a ‘word against death’ is but one. We must acknowledge laughter can take many forms, either destructive in nature (linked with derision and shame, ridicule and blasphemy, and ultimately with tragedy and death), or life-enhancing (associated with creation and birth, joy, sexuality and eroticism, food, feasts and comedies, all things linked with the body).

Because it is such an uncertain and potentially unstable phenomenon, it comes as no surprise that laughter has often been perceived as potentially dangerous, particularly by those in positions of power within a society, who may fear ridicule leads to a lack of respect and authority; for laughter can be contagious, causing others to laugh at the absurd and the pompous. For such people, laughter is threatening and in the 'wrong' hands can belittle and deflate the image of the most dangerous dictator or repressive regime. To authorities without a truly democratic or popular mandate, any laughter of ridicule must be contained, controlled, and ultimately suppressed, before the particular regime or 'emperor' (of the familiar nursery rhyme story sung by Danny Kaye) is seen not to have new clothes of majesty and glory, but no clothes at all! Despotic regimes do

not like to find their nakedness or dark deeds exposed to the glare of light or adverse publicity, so dignity, control, and decorum must be maintained at all costs, lest the facade begin to crumble and the regime fall. Sadly this is as true of Church hierarchy as of any secular authority. So both laughter and life have to be kept in check if control is to be maintained. Modern-day liberation theology challenges any such repression, and will be considered in chapter six.

Gilhus' work focuses upon laughter in the history of religions in general, and not specifically upon its relationship with death as such; nonetheless, I suggest these inevitably intersect and overlap, since laughter intersects between mind and body, the individual and society, and the rational with the irrational. This thesis intends to do what Kuschel says in his theological reflection on laughter, 'to reflect on laughter seriously enough not to lose pleasure in doing so' (1994.xi).

Janis Udris, in a thesis on *Grotesque and Excremental Humour: Monty Python's The Meaning of Life* (1988), examines the sources of attitudes to the grotesque and the excremental, … in order to understand attitudes to the grotesque/excremental in our contemporary culture (Summary of Thesis Abstract http://ethos.bl.uk/ Thesis 00537847). I review this work because it links in with Gilhus and various theologians by emphasizing the importance of the body in our considerations of laughter. Both Udris and Gilhus were clearly influenced by Mikhael Bakhtin's work on Rabelais and carnival, in that both the grotesque and the excremental nature of life have clear links with laughter as a bodily function, with both representing the earthy carnal aspect of human life and existence, and thus ultimately have a bearing upon mortality and death (one focus of my particular research project).

Udris suggests our understanding of the grotesque has been marked by its diversity, but also (through its gradual development over time) the literary formulations of various authors, suggesting it now occupies a position somewhere between the uncanny/frightening and the laughable, quoting Ruskin's description as: 'a combination of the fearful and the ludicrous', and also Michael Steig, whereby: 'the grotesque involves the managing of the uncanny by the comic' (1988.6). This is relevant to laughter employed as a 'word against death', discussed in chapter seven, below. Bakhtin discusses the Rabelaisian literature in which the 'material bodily principle' and 'grotesque realism' are linked, Udris supporting Bakhtin's view that gross images of excessive physicality in medieval literature have been misinterpreted ...'according to the narrow and modified meaning which modern ideology, especially that of the nineteenth century, attributed to 'materiality' and 'the body'' (Bakhtin, 1968.18,

Udris,1988.7). They criticize the contemporary understanding and interpretation which overlooks how: 'In grotesque realism ... the bodily element is deeply positive, … [how] the body and bodily life have … a cosmic and at the same time an all-people's character' (Bakhtin, 1968.19). In grotesque realism, they consider that all that was spiritual/ideal/abstract is transferred to an earthly/bodily sphere, with 'the people's laughter ... linked with the bodily lower stratum', with Udris suggesting: 'Laughter degrades and materialises', in a way which Bakhtin notes: 'relates to acts of defecation and copulation, pregnancy and birth, ... degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerative one', resulting in: 'a pregnant death, a death that gives birth' (1968.20,21,25) (Udris 1988.8). Given this regenerative aspect, I suggest such laughter may qualify for consideration as a 'word against death'.

A more specific component of grotesque realism is the 'grotesque body', defined as a body in contact with the cosmos, particularly stressing those parts *open* to communication with the outside world: the mouth, anus, hands, feet, breasts, nose, all points of contact with the cosmos where we interact with and experience the world around us, using all the senses of touch, taste, sight, smell, and hearing, where Bakhtin claims: 'the body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, and defecation' (1968.26). Bakhtin suggests the essential role and features of the grotesque body: "belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new, second body; the bowels and the phallus" (Bakhtin, 1968.317, Udris, 1988.9). Thus Udris asserts: 'the grotesque body was defined by those features which could take on a degree of independent existence and transgress the boundaries separating the inside and outside of the body, and which could express the regenerative fundamentally erotic aspects of humanity … Bodily secretions such as vomiting, urine and shit were also positive, regenerative substances', all those things which Bakhtin says: "degrades and relieves at the same time, transforming fear into laughter" (1988.9,10). Here Udris suggests the determining influence on notions of the body (both grotesque and non-grotesque), was the gradual development of capitalism in Western Europe (1988.13), which replaced the perception of the grotesque regenerative body, non-individuated and at one with the cosmos, and an expression of communality, by:

> Our present perception of the 'modern' body, as one that is separate, atomised, entirely individuated, where each individual lives his/her experience as a self-constituting entity, a cerebral experience likely to renounce or refuse to

> acknowledge the earthiness and grossness encompassed in the grotesque. (1988.13)

Indeed, Bakhtin first identified this shift in Renaissance literature, where he detected: ‘the first widespread splitting of the private body from the 'universal body', with the positive regenerative aspects of the grotesque also diminishing', subsequently charting the development of the individual-grotesque and the Romantic grotesque through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in which he perceived a decline in visual representations of the grotesque, resulting in the transposing of the carnival spirit to a subjective idealist philosophy, and: ‘the constipation of laughter into irony and sarcasm’ (1988.14). Udris notes this period saw the development of: ‘the *terror* dimension of the grotesque at the expense of any remaining bodily excesses', Bakhtin’s commenting: ‘images of bodily life, such as eating, drinking, copulation, defecation, almost entirely lost their regenerative power and were turned into vulgarities’ (1968.39) (1988.15). Such attitudes towards grotesque and excremental humour remain relevant to laughter in a post-modern context, leading Udris to question whether grotesque realism is dead, or whether some residual aspects of the medieval attitudes to the excremental have survived into our culture today, and whether something of Bakhtin’s: 'lower material bodily principle' lives on in contemporary language.

In a section entitled *The Comedic: Return of the repressed*, Udris begins with the (unacknowledged) quotation (from Nietzsche): “Man alone suffers so excruciatingly that he was compelled to invent laughter”, and asserts that whilst the 'classical' notion of comedy is generally defined in relation to ‘tragedy’, it has been found impossible to coexist with any adequate model of psychology or sociology, hence the use of the terms 'comedic', and 'comedicity', being the state of an element defined as comedic (1988.61). In looking for further distinctions between comedy (or the comic) and humour, Udris refers to Freud, who in formulating his theoretical model of jokes and the comic, introduces his conception of humour as an additional or separate form of pleasure to be distinguished from the other two, surmising: “The pleasure in jokes has seemed to us to arise from an *economy in expenditure upon inhibition*, the pleasure in the comic from an *economy in expenditure upon ideation* (upon cathexis), and the pleasure in humour from an *economy in expenditure upon feeling*” (1976.302). Udris considers this definition something of an afterthought, not defined with anything approaching Freud's customary rigour, and thereby potentially lacking theoretical conviction (1988.63, 64). However, Udris found Freud's work on jokes, the comic and the unconscious, to be of particular use, especially when dealing with such areas covered by 'The purpose of jokes' (1976.132-162), 'The mechanism of pleasure and

the psychogenesis of jokes' (1976.165-190), and 'The relation of jokes to dreams and to the unconscious' (1976.215-238) (Udris 1988.65).

In summary, Udris draws attention to the body and its primacy in the function and expression of laughter, and how laughter may draw upon the excremental and grotesque elements of bodily life. This leads me to suggest that in developing a Christian theology of laughter we cannot readily dismiss the role of the grotesque and the excremental, nor ignore the ‘lower material bodily stratum’ which underlies it, and these aspects will be considered in chapter seven, below. For Udris concurs with Bakhtin, Gilhus, and many other scholars who stress the importance of the body and embodiment, something I suggest is relevant when considering laughter and its potential use as a ‘word against death’.

In the Introduction to Mikhael Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and his World* (1984), we are reminded that during the early period of the Roman state, the triumphal procession laid on for its victorious generals included on almost equal terms both glorification and derision, reminding the victor of his mortality. Similarly in that society: ‘the funeral rite was also composed of lamenting (glorifying) and deriding the deceased’, indicating that laughter had an important role to play in the funeral rites of notables, and may thereby be qualified as a ‘word against death’ (1984. 6, 70).

Bakhtin asserts the medieval and Renaissance grotesque of the Middle Ages had somehow lost some of its positive regenerating power by the time of its subsequent development into the Romantic grotesque and genre, with its private “chamber” character (1984.37, 38). During that preceding earlier period of carnivals and feasts (particularly in the plays associated with Corpus Christi in England), Bakhtin provides additional evidence for the use of laughter as a ‘word against death’, advising:

> The images of folk culture are absolutely fearless and communicate this fearlessness to all. The high point of this spirit is reached in Rabelais’ novel; here fear is destroyed at its very origin and everything is turned into gaiety (1984.39). … Folk culture was familiar with the element of terror only as represented by comic monsters, who were defeated by laughter. Terror was turned into something gay and comic. (1984.47)

Bakhtin indicates that even death, the most powerful enemy of mankind, may be defeated and retreat before the satirical use of laughter employed as a ‘word against death’. Bakhtin’s work features prominently in the works of Gilhus and Udris, and will

be highlighted in my own research, receiving further consideration in chapter five, and providing further evidence for the use of laughter and humour as ‘words against death’ in chapter seven.

Michael Screech in *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (1997) examines changing Christian attitudes to laughter, and their deep influence on literary practice. He considers how Christians focused on the different kinds of laughter in the Bible, and the implicit lessons to be drawn about pleasure, piety, justice and revenge. He believes God gave divine sanction to laughter, but regrets many in positions of power and authority never accepted laughter as a vehicle for Christian joy, Christian preaching, or the propagation of Christian truth, and never understood what such laughter implied (1997.xxiii). Screech highlights how, since the crucifixion, where many present considered Jesus to be mad – and laughed (see Matthew 27. 39-44, Mark 15. 29-32, Luke 23. 35-37), the Christian tradition has been deeply divided about laughter. He questions whether St Paul, when he appears to condemn 'jesting', intended this to include the sophisticated wit admired by the Greeks, and whether high spirits or mockery can *ever* be appropriate in this vale of tears. Screech considers such questions were central to Erasmus, Rabelais, and the other great humanist writers of the Renaissance, noting how Rabelais often comically distorted the words of Jesus, and, instead of preaching only solemn sermons, makes us laugh with happy charity at the grotesque glutton Gargantua. He reviews how Erasmus adapted the satirical style of Lucian in order to poke fun at clerical abuses, and how the extraordinary individual achievements of both scholars affect the way we laugh even now, suggesting through them the pervasive laughter of the Renaissance and Reformation periods continues to serve as both guides and exemplars.

Screech believes the God of the Jewish and Christian faiths could easily have become the God of laughter, and that the divinely imposed names of the Jewish Patriarchs carried deep religious significance in biblical times, none more so than Isaac, whose name means 'laughter', even if the kind of laughter implied is not specified and is by no means certain (1997.xix, xx). Improved translation skills applied to the Scriptures from the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, which came about in the Renaissance period, together with the insights of Plato and other Greek and Roman scholars, gave greater understanding, knowledge and input into the development of Christian ideas about laughter, as seen in the work of Erasmus and Rabelais. Whilst Aristotle noted (in his treatise *On the Parts of Animals,* X,29) that 'no animal laughs save man', this point is also made in Rabelais's basic definition of Man in the opening verses of *Pantagruel*: 'Tis better to write of laughter than of tears, Since laughter is the property of man'.

Screech develops and assesses this theme of Christian laughter in both Old and New Testaments, and in the great scholars of antiquity, finally focusing upon the work of Erasmus and Rabelais. He traces the licence given for laughter in carnival, and at various times within the Liturgical Year during the Medieval period, concluding : 'true Christian laughter stems from the conviction of absolute certainty. Christ on the Cross can easily be made as laughable as Carabba or Panurge [characters in Rabelais' novels] if you think him simply mad and deluded' (1997.310). Screech considers the laughter which Erasmus and Rabelais sought to recover in their writings was one of charity, with which: 'comes a deeper understanding of the mercy of God and the redeeming power of Christ' (1997.312), suggesting: 'Charity opens the floodgates to joy, and joy can lead to ample laughter. It is joyful rather than mocking laughter which dominates Rabelais's letter to Cardinal Odet de Chastillon' (1997. 134). The mocking 'Laughter at the Foot of the Cross' leads into that 'charity' and 'joy' of the risen Christ, which has laughter as its key. Whilst a more general link between laughter and death is not made explicitly as such (apart from the emphasis Screech makes in his title), I believe 'words against death' are there to be found, and specifically in focusing upon the resurrection of Christ.

Beverly W. Harrison in *The Power of Anger in the Work of Love: Christian Ethics for Women and Other Strangers* (1990), writing from a feminist perspective, explores what the work of (righteous) anger and radical love involves, offering a feminist critique of Christianity itself. The points she raises about anger similarly parallels the role of humour and laughter. Both are spontaneous bodily reactions, with a shared history of suppression within Church circles, and similarly help to challenge and ridicule power structures within institutions and wider society. Harrison also emphasizes the significance of embodiment, drawing attention to the gap between our emotions and the traditional detached 'cerebral' stance privileged within Church circles over past centuries. Her work is interesting, and may contribute helpful insights towards the development of a Christian theology of laughter, in that laughter and humour also help to shape our sense of identity and self-worth, can function to build up community life, as well as enable us to challenge and question institutions of power within our society, and like (righteous) anger, may also be a work of love.

Melissa A.Jackson in *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation: A Subversive Collaboration* (2012) looks for evidence of comedy within the Hebrew Bible narratives, particularly in the lives of Judaism's matriarchal and other dominant female characters, by bringing together a critique drawing on both comedy and a feminist-critical interpretive perspective, and focusing on nine criteria where she considers they interact with one

another. She looks for comedy in the literary devices employed, and the psychological/social features and functions to be discerned in the text in reconstructing the underlying comedy. Her work and insights are considered briefly in chapter two (the Old Testament), and receive further consideration when insights from feminism are examined in chapter five. For Jackson, foreignness is a significant factor in the stories and background of the varied characters she highlights, together with the role that violence plays in the comic, to the extent that she acknowledges that violence permeates the Hebrew Bible, and the comedy found within it, whereby the aggressive hostile aspect of comedy is evident. Her work is interesting and original, but having reviewed the type of comedy Jackson has discerned in the Hebrew Bible, my analysis is such humour and laughter as may arise from that comedy is more akin to the mocking, derisive, and superior laughter evident in some of the psalms, considered in my chapter two.

Jacqueline A. Bussie in *The Laughter of the Oppressed* (2007) provides a recent major treatment of a theology of laughter, albeit from a tragic point of view, drawing upon the novels of Elie Wiesel (*Gates of the Forest*, 1986, based on the Jewish experience of the Holocaust, of which Wiesel is a survivor, and Nobel prizewinner), Shusako Endo (*Silence,* 1969, reflecting on Christian persecution, martyrdom, and apostasy in early seventeenth-century Japan), and Toni Morrison (*Beloved,* 1987, focusing on the African-American experience and consciousness of the injustices of slavery in the nineteenth century). Bussie says each: 'present suffering, death, apostasy, and oppression as evoking a laughter that is ethically responsible rather than reprehensible' (2007.12), from which she seeks to reconstruct a theology of laughter, but interestingly for this particular thesis, from the perspective of the oppressed, a consideration of laughter “from below”, from the marginalised and oppressed within society, with laughter here cast in a role which is far from comedy and humour. Whilst her views and arguments will be analysed in more detail in the concluding chapters, Bussie challenges us to look for the theological and ethical significance of the laughter of the oppressed, and what it means to laugh at the horrible, and to laugh while one suffers. This involves the converse of the *superiority theory,* where (as noted previously) Robert Solomon (2002) offers a variant in suggesting an *inferiority* theory of humour based in inferiority or modesty. Bussie notes how the majority of ethical philosophical theory and Western theology maintains that laughter is nihilistic and irresponsible, and argues the dominant social location of these theologians and theorists have resulted in a failure to consider laughter “from below”. She argues that laughter can also function as an invaluable ethical and theological mode of resistance in the face of radically negating

oppression, seen from what Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes as: 'the perspective of the outcast, the suspect, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled – in short, from the perspective of those who suffer' (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, quoted by Bussie 2007.1).

Noting how people laugh out of a particular social context, an insight described by Bussie as the great contribution of liberation theologies, hers is an important and earnest endeavour to do theology “from below”, suggesting the failure to analyse the laughter of the marginalised is because theologians and philosophers have tended to ignore laughter's social context, and mistakenly conflated laughter with humour and comedy (2007.9, 10). She notes: 'Most theory therefore fails even to consider laughter in conjunction with horror or suffering, which leads to theoretical oversimplification and overgeneralisation' (2007.10). Although laughter is generally associated only with comedy, Bussie is concerned with the meaning of laughter that occurs in *tragedy*, noting what she sees as Christian theology's bias against laughter, particularly the laughter of the oppressed, providing fresh and innovative insights into this long neglected phenomenon (2007.10).

In noting how the *superiority theory* draws upon Plato's Socratic dialogue in *Philebus*, theorizing that we laugh at those who are powerless, weak, and self-ignorant, in order that we can consider ourselves superior, morally, socially, and psychologically, Bussie highlights how: 'laughter takes that which we perceive as inferior as object' (2007.11). She asserts: 'Laughter engenders intemperance, irritability, and immoderate emotional responses, therefore laughter … is a threat to both rationality and the governance of the state', something which then results: 'in ethical rebellion and subversiveness towards authority', noting how Plato was the first to recognise that laughter threatens to undermine the status quo (2007.11).

Thomas Hobbes in first propounding the *superiority theory* (see Billig 2005.57) suggested that laughter degrades and derides, expressing scorn, derision, and ridicule towards its object. For Aristotle in *Poetics*, has similarly thought the locus of laughter is derision and a sentiment of superiority, with immoderate laughter ethically unsuitable and oftentimes cruel, with both Aristotle and Cicero in agreement that laughter is a form of ridicule, and that certain subjects should be considered taboo as objects of laughter (2007.11,12). Here, it should be noted, these philosophers describe laughter from only one particular social location, that being one of superiority and dominance, as is usually associated with power and autonomy. However, Bussie believes the *superiority theory* fails to take into account the laughter of the oppressed, its

disenfranchised “inferiors”: 'whose laughter *also* affirms autonomy and power, and thereby struggles to be heard over the laughter of the hegemony. The competing laughter of the oppressed serves as counterpoint to the dominant laughter, and destabilizes the oppressors’ assertion of dominance’ (2007.13). This phenomenon of the laughter of the oppressed “from below” and her views and arguments, clearly pertinent to this particular thesis, and will be analysed in more detail in my chapters six and seven.

Stephen Halliwell in *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity* (2008) studies the history of laughter through from Ancient Greece and the laughter of the Homeric Gods. However, in his final chapter he briefly considers the laughter of the Old Testament, comparing it with the Gospels, and the derisive mocking laughter used against Jesus in his passion and crucifixion, and subsequently against early Christians He notes how in Paul's writings and ethical preaching, the themes of mockery, indecent language, and joking figure most prominently (2008.476). He traces this through into the antigelastic tendencies of early Christianity, particularly focusing on the concerns regarding laughter expressed by the Early Church Fathers, Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, and Basil of Caesarea. His work will be drawn upon where appropriate in subsequent chapters.

Constructive Theologies of Laughter

Elton Trueblood (1964) considers that throughout the Gospels, Christ employed humour for the sake of truth, and, seen in this light, many of his teachings become brilliantly clear for the first time, noting: 'Irony, satire, paradox, even laughter itself help to clarify Christ's famous parables, his brief sayings, and important events in his life' (1964. back cover). Trueblood asserts the need to watch for humour in all aspects of Christ's life and teachings, in order to overcome an almost universal failure to appreciate this element in Christ's life, without which any understanding of Jesus is inevitably distorted. He believes that much of the relevant evidence is deeply hidden, and may remain unrecognised without some analysis, requiring reference to deeds as well as words, with irony the type of humour to be most frequently found in the gospels (1964.10). Accordingly, he considers the gospel message needs to be freed from excessive sobriety, and to realise that Christ was not always engaged in pious talk, and here I agree with this analysis.

In reading the gospels, Trueblood believes modern biblical scholarship enables us to probably know more details of Jesus's life than even the Apostle Paul, giving us an

advantage Paul never had (1964.11), suggesting that anyone who reads the Synoptic Gospels with a relative freedom from presuppositions, might be expected to see that Christ laughed, and expected others to laugh. However, Trueblood fears some sort of misguided piety has made us fear acceptance of Jesus' obvious wit and humour, in a way which envisages laughter as somehow mildly blasphemous or sacrilegious. Trueblood thinks Jesus often used wry humour, indicated through the sharpness of his wit, and his frequent use of some witty paradox in his teaching. Indeed, in a consistent employment of paradox, there is always a hint of the laughable, such as in Jesus' example of the blind leading the blind, which the perceptive would have appreciated, but which might have been missed by the 'unhumorous and the literal-minded'.

When Jesus received the hospitality of tax collectors and sinners, he was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard, suggesting to Trueblood that in his company one might readily expect gaiety to be in evidence, and whilst this is not actually detailed in the gospel accounts, Trueblood thinks this can be implied, although here I think this argument is rather speculative and weak. In Luke 7.31-35 Jesus answers his critics by comparing them to children in the market place, neither dancing when we piped to you, (a situation where one might expect laughter and rejoicing to be apparent), nor weeping when we wailed. Trueblood notes Jesus' concluding response: 'Yet wisdom is justified by all her children' as a final sharp thrust characteristic of Christ's sly humour, considering: 'that mirth and compassion are compatible is one of the greatest lessons mankind can learn' (1964.22).

Trueblood considers that the twentieth-century writer who has done most to overcome the misapprehension that Christianity is a religion of sorrow, and only of sorrow, is G.K. Chesterton, whose most revealing insight was to point out the paradox of the fundamental sadness of Epicureanism, and the enormous contrast between the gay spirit of the early Christians, and the pensiveness and melancholy mood of Omar Khayyam (1964.29). In *Heretics*, Chesterton revealed how the characteristic man of classical antiquity was less boisterous than the Christian, and how Christianity is fundamentally a religion of joy, completing this task in the following passage from *Orthodoxy* (1927):

> It is said that Paganism is a religion of joy and Christianity of sorrow; it would be just as easy to prove that Paganism is pure sorrow and Christianity pure joy. Such conflicts mean nothing and lead nowhere. Everything human must have in it both joy and sorrow; the only matter of interest is the manner in which the two things are balanced or divided. And

> the really interesting thing is this, that the pagan was (in the main) happier and happier as he approached the earth, but sadder and sadder as he approached the heavens. (1927.294, 295)

Chesterton contends it took something like the gospel message to make poor men experience “cosmic contentment”, and that Christianity fits man's deepest need because it makes him concentrate on joys which do not pass away, rather than the inevitable grief which is superficial. Turning to the: ‘strange small book from which all Christianity came’, he concentrates on the: 'tremendous figure [of Jesus] which fills the Gospels towers', one whose: 'pathos was natural, almost casual' (1927.298). Chesterton notes how:

> The Stoics, ancient and modern, were proud of concealing their tears. He never concealed His tears: He showed them plainly on His open face at any daily sight, such as the far sight of His native city. Yet he concealed something. Solemn supermen and imperial diplomatists are proud of restraining their anger. He never restrained His anger. He flung furniture down the front steps of the Temple, and asked men how they expected to escape the damnation of Hell. Yet He restrained something … There was something that He covered constantly by abrupt silence or impetuous isolation. There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked upon our earth; and I have sometimes fancied that bit was his mirth. (1927.298, 299)

Trueblood asserts that the Christian is not blind to injustice and suffering, as these are never *ultimate*: ‘The well-known humour of the Christian is not a way of denying the tears, but rather a way of affirming something which is deeper than tears’ (1964.32). Trueblood believes that if Christ laughed a great deal (as his evidence indicates), and if he is what he claimed to be, we cannot avoid the logical conclusion that there is laughter and gaiety in the heart of God (1964.32). I believe this is a very important observation to be borne in mind, since this would entirely justify the development of a Christian theology of laughter, even though Trueblood does not as such seek to develop one. The only direct connection between laughter and death (as such) that Trueblood makes is in drawing our attention to a passage from Donald Hankey in *A Student in Arms*, which I quote in my chapter seven.

Richard Cote in *Holy Mirth: A Theology of Laughter* (1986) argues that humour is an integral dimension of Christian faith, reflecting and acknowledging God's divine sense of humour, and therefore something which needs to be integrated into our own spirituality if we hope to preach the Good News of God's love to a troubled world. His

book appears to be the first to suggest a theology of laughter, by seeking to examine God's sense of humour, perceiving laughter as a sign of the divine presence, both affirming our hopes for redemption, and giving us encouragement in the face of evil. Reflecting upon why we find it difficult to laugh, when compared with God's sense of humour, he believes this may be discerned in the Scriptures. Cote finds elements which he believes enable us to discover such a theology of laughter, one that might have practical applications for both faith and Christian ministry, thereby enabling us to possess our faith in a challenging revitalized way. Here Cote challenges Christian theology to reassess its historical suspicion of laughter, and in attempting to articulate a theology of laughter, he acknowledges this may challenge or threaten some of our basic spiritual values, beliefs, and attitudes, and may be seen by some as a "subversive" theology which may subvert our understanding of human progress. But for Cote: 'more important[ly] it allows God to creep back into our secular world, and this divine intrusion is not without its own subversive and humorous results' (1986.10). As God is both the origin and the goal of everything that is, Cote suggests this must include human laughter, his basic thesis being that humour is an integral dimension of Christian faith, whether in Christian living, spirituality, or theology.

Cote considers why Christians find it difficult to laugh in today's world, and why Jesus has never been seriously portrayed as one who could and probably did laugh heartily, reviewing some recent theological developments that have helped to pave the way for suggesting a theology of laughter. Here he highlights negative theology, the theology of play, and process theology, each of which he believes can bring an important corrective to our traditional understanding of God, thereby opening the possibility for us to imagine a God who can and does laugh (examined in chapter seven). Cote seeks to show how God's own sense of humour comes through to us in Scripture, as well as thinking how this should also be apparent in our response to God's word. This then enables him to propose a more fully developed theology of laughter, to suggest some practical applications of this theology, and then consider quite what this might mean for our own life of faith and for Christian ministry. A more detailed appraisal of Cote's work on a theology of laughter is deferred to chapter seven.

Karl-Josef Kuschel in *Laughter: A Theological Reflection* (1994): 'presupposes that in Jesus' spirit of joy in both God and human beings it is possible to laugh ... because this laughter is the expression of an unquenchable hope', … providing: 'a therapy for anaesthesia of the heart' (1994.xii). He wishes: 'to pursue a theology of laughter in such a way that one understands what laughter is, what functions it has, what damages it conceals – in order perhaps to be able to laugh all the more easily' (1994.xi).

Interestingly, Kuschel (writing in German), seems unaware of Cote's pioneering work, making no reference to it in his work or bibliography. He is critical of the Catholic Church during a time described by Karl Rahner as a 'wintry season', blighted over many years by: 'the cold front of authoritarianism', when laughter and humour had been largely and consistently suppressed, and where some had opted and voted with their feet and: 'bidden the church farewell, with mocking laughter, because the discrepancy between their expectations and the wretchedness of reality has come to seem increasingly more grotesque' (1994.xi).

Writing soon after the Second Vatican Council, Kuschel hoped to provide a counterpoint to overcome such discrepancies, encouraging a situation where: 'neither the hibernation mentality nor mocking laughter are an appropriate expression of what must be the church's one and only concern: the person and cause of Jesus Christ, ... the only criterion for any work in theology and the church' (1994.xii). His theology of laughter is intended as a counter-proposal to the narrow authoritarianism in the church, describing all who remain as the: 'useful idiots of the church's apparatus' (1994.xii). He aims to recover both laughter and some understanding of a theology of laughter within the Church, a sentiment underlying James Martin's work. Kuschel believes that since laughter is such an important element in life, there would be something wrong if it could not be heard in theology; but this laughter is: 'not mocking laughter, but the laughter which indicates delight and joy', and that because such laughter was not being heard in the Roman Catholic Church during its 'wintry season', was an important indication of its prevailing problems (1994. back cover).

Given the long history of denunciation of laughter in much of the Church, often reflecting narrow authoritarianism over the centuries, Kuschel rejoices that many basic questions of our understanding of God and of human beings are being opened up by the topic of laughter, in a 'mixture of frivolity and profundity' (1994. xi). Whilst many writers and theologians noted that nowhere in the gospels is it recorded that Jesus ever laughed, but that only in the events of his Passion there were plenty who laughed at him, Kuschel believes this has had a profound effect on Christianity regarding the appropriateness of laughter. For Kuschel, this long prevailing disapproval has only been corrected, and some sense of joy and mirth recovered, since the input of the Humanists like Erasmus and Rabelais, writing in the early sixteenth century.

Kuschel's basic premise is: 'that a theology of laughter derives its legitimation from the laughter of God himself about the state of his creation', and: 'reflects on the laughter of Christians and is aware of the risk of being laughed at' (1994.xviii, xix). This may, of

course, involve not only joy, but also mockery; and not just humour, but malice too, just as Jesus himself experienced at Calvary. Laughter can take many forms, some of them life-affirming, others hurtful and destructive, as is readily apparent, hence many have sought to contain and control laughter, and sometimes deliberately to suppress it, with the Church itself in the past doing much to discredit or censure laughter. Whilst we live in a society accustomed to being able to laugh at everything, Kuschel both comments and warns that in today's society: 'Jokes about everything and anyone are cheap. There is no taboo which is not broken, no feeling which is not mocked, no authority which is not maliciously put in question' (1994.xx). Again, a more detailed appraisal of Kuschel's work will be found in chapter seven, below.

James Martin's *Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humour, and Laughter Are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life* (2011), assures us that God wants us to experience joy, to cultivate a sense of holy humour, and to laugh at life's absurdities – not to mention at ourselves and our own humanity. His work invites us to lighten up and enjoy our holy religion, for believers to rediscover the importance of humour and laughter in our daily lives, and to embrace what he sees as an essential truth: that faith leads to joy. For Martin, holy people are joyful people, and he offers countless examples of healthy humour and purposeful levity in the stories of biblical heroes and heroines, and in the lives of the saints and the world's great spiritual masters. Drawing upon Scripture, he illustrates how parables are often the stuff of comedy, and believes the gospels reveal Jesus to be a man with a palpable sense of joy and even playfulness, and shares anecdotes from his life's experience as a Catholic priest and Jesuit. He suggests joy, humour, and laughter help us to live more spiritual lives, to understand ourselves and others better, and to more fully appreciate God's presence among us, thereby enabling us to deepen our relationship with God and with our brothers and sisters.

Martin finds a tantalizing historical explanation for the dearth of humour and playfulness in some religious circles in Barbara Ehrenreich's *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* (2007), highlighting concerns that bothered those in authority in Western Culture about enthusiasm and collective joy (often seen as primitive and hedonistic, Durkheim noting that collective ritual often involved collective effervescense). Here high-spirited public gatherings were perceived as potentially dangerous, and were often suppressed by fearful authorities as posing an implicit threat to social order, especially where they might mock those in authority and thereby threaten the more powerful in society. Martin notes: 'Laughter can be rebellious', and says: 'Such gatherings could so alter the status quo that they might pose an actual threat, as they did during, say, the French Revolution. Joy can be subversive' (2011.49). He highlights a similar point

made by Conrad Hyers (1981), that: “Because of the variety of illiberal forms of laughter, it has been easy for sensitive souls to see it as dangerous and volatile gas that must be tightly bottled up” (2011.49). Martin’s work proves a useful resource to draw upon in seeking to develop a theology of laughter, but he does not attempt to do so himself, merely encouraging Christians and people of all faith communities to recover a sense of joy, humour and happiness in Christian spirituality, and thereby of laughter in the exercise of their religious life and faith, particularly seen to be necessary in those who lead those faith communities.

John Dart in *The Laughing Savior* (1976) outlines the Gnostic manuscripts discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945, which I suggest are key to understanding a prime force shaping early Christianity. These sacred writings of the ‘Gnostics’, as a strange and varied religious movement that confronted the early Christian Church, reveal a religion related to, but radically distinct from the Judeo-Christian tradition, and then virtually forgotten for over sixteen centuries, apart from surviving criticism aimed at them in writings from some of the early Church Fathers. Despite their belief in several mythical redeemer figures, no one central figure enters into their philosophy as clearly as the Christian Jesus. Dart’s work relates the story of the discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts, examining in detail the fifty-two treatises retrieved for scholastic examination and analysis, and assesses their significance in the formative period of the first three centuries of the Common Era in which Judaism and Christianity developed, and what new light and insight they can bring to modern scholarship. Dart thinks that whilst the Gnostics with their provocative religious imagery did reap the mockery they had sowed, nonetheless their cultivation of radically different religious concepts did contribute to the creative religious climate of the first centuries, and that Western civilization was poorer for the loss of their writings prior to their rediscovery. Consideration will therefore be given to them when considering laughter in the Bible in chapter three, *The Gospel of Thomas* noting: ‘Whoever penetrates the meaning of these words will not taste death’, with laughter potentially seen as a ‘word against death’.

In *The Laughing Jesus: Religious Lies and Gnostic Wisdom* (2005), Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy provide a manifesto for modern-day Gnostic mysticism in a passionate reinterpretation of Gnostic spirituality, of transforming oneself and the world by exploring *gnosis*. They consider that Gnostic Christians symbolize a profound state of oneness and love occasioned by the enigmatic figure of the laughing Jesus, but their work does not actually focus much on the laughter of Jesus indicated in the title, but whilst providing an initial overview of Gnosticism, this work proved to be somewhat ‘New Age’, lightweight and populist, rather than the scholarly and academic work I had

hoped for. Their thesis is that we have inherited a distorted form of Christianity, something created by the Church in Rome early in the fourth century, particularly by focusing exclusively on Jesus as the 'man of sorrows'. They suggest the original Christians did not see in Jesus an historical figure who had 'suffered for our sins', but rather one who was the mythical hero of a symbolic teaching story representing the spiritual journey leading to the experience of awakening, something which they called 'gnosis' or 'knowing'.

Those who thought this way were later to be grouped under the all-embracing description of 'Gnostics', but in truth they were a rather loose alliance of a diverse number of groups of free-thinking 'non-conformists', whose beliefs and teachings of *gnosis*, and whose image of the laughing Jesus, came to be subsequently suppressed by orthodox Christianity. This became especially apparent after the Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, and had invited Christian bishops to a conference in Nicea in 325 CE, with a view to define and fix the beliefs and dogmas of the Christian faith, out of which emerged the so-called Nicene Creed. However, Freke and Gandy consider: 'The Nicean Creed was designed by a despotic Roman emperor and imposed on Christianity by force', and from that date the suppression of the Gnostics began with the full backing of the Roman Empire, whereby what they see as 'Literalist' Christians set about persecuting their Gnostic and Pagan rivals out of existence, with various philosophers and heretics being either murdered or exiled (2005.78, 79). Freke and Gandy intend their book to be: 'a damning indictment of Literalist religion and a passionate affirmation of Gnostic spirituality' (2005.5). Though their account of both Gnosticism and non-Gnostic Christianity can be readily challenged, their book is important because early forms of Gnosticism were concerned with laughter and its spiritual value, a concern which they seek to resurrect, insofar as they seek to promote greater interest and awareness of Gnosticism today. However, I personally found that they had very little to say about the apparent connection other scholars have made between Gnosticism and laughter, despite the title of their book.

Ingvild Gilhus's work has proved far more helpful in pointing out how the various Gnostic groups (flourishing at a time when Christian doctrine was not yet firmly established, and regarded by the early Church as *enfants terribles*) did, however, embrace laughter, and moreover cultivated and made explicit use of it in their texts, in a way in which irony, paradox and comedy were frequently used. Gilhus considers that in Gnosticism, laughter is a sign of receptivity, when the body, literally speaking, opens up; a laughter that is ambivalent, encompassing both knowledge and mockery

(1997.75). Whilst Freke and Gandy emphasize the collective nature of Gnosticism, Gilhus, concerned with a recovery of understanding of how the body is involved with laughter, laments how, in the Christian era, laughter was drawn into the context of the individual body, with laughter condemned because it was associated with bodily life, especially with eroticism. She states:

> How erotic life was exorcized from religious laughter and replaced with spirituality is one of the great dramatic changes in the history of religious laughter in the West. … Laughter was restricted by the early Church, made into mythology with a vengeance by the Gnostics, but blossomed in the late Medieval Church. The early Church as well as the Gnostics spiritualized laughter; they made it refer either to piety or to *gnosis*. … In both these phases of Christianity, the human body was the dominant interpretative context of laughter. (1997.137)

These various aspects will each receive consideration in the course of my research outlined in this thesis.

Conclusion

For both Gilhus and Screech, laughter functions in religion as a symbol of ambiguity and paradox, something not easily classified or tied down, as easily cruel as charitable, nonetheless a paradox that inches us into the mystery of the divine. For Trueblood, Martin and Cote, laughter somehow reflects something of the very constituency of the Godhead, and therefore provides some access into the divine nature, by subverting dominant paradigms and offering horizons of hope. Kuschel perceives something in the subversive nature of laughter that enables it to be anti-authoritarian, which allows subjugated ways of knowing to emerge. Dart brings into play the significance of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic Library, and Freke and Gandy remind us that early Christianity was divided over the place of laughter in salvation, with the Gnostic groups defining the territory upon which the theological nature of laughter was fought over. These works demonstrate that a theology of laughter is possible, that it has roots in a rich tradition of dispute over the nature of laughter, and has its place in the drama of salvation. It is perhaps unsurprising then that an interest in theology of laughter has emerged in a post-modern world concerned with ambiguity, paradox, and subjugated ways of knowing.

Though some of these authors mention death in passing, they offer no sustained reflection upon the place of laughter in dealing with death within a Christian context and

viewpoint, neither do they come anywhere near suggesting that laughter is specifically a ‘word against death’, although they do more than hint at the resurrection of Jesus being God’s last laugh on death. It is a sustained reflection on the nature of laughter as a ‘word against death’ that I intend to identify and present as I seek to contribute towards a Christian theology of laughter, and to expand Davies’ existing definition.

We now move on to consider the evidence for laughter in the Bible, and its implications for addressing death.

CHAPTER TWO: LAUGHTER IN THE BIBLE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR ADDRESSING DEATH

Introductory Remarks and Scene-Setting

The Bible presents the foundational literature for all Christian thinking about laughter, and its implications for conceiving laughter as a ‘word against death’. In this chapter I will consider key biblical passages in which laughter is either explicitly or implicitly

found, examining them as a theme. This will be primarily towards establishing a Christian theology of laughter, but noting potential use of laughter as a ‘word against death’ where appropriate. Because biblical literature is such a varied collection, and a large one at that, it will be necessary to treat Old Testament and New Testament passages separately, without losing sight of the continuities across the Bible in both its portrayal of the God of Israel found in the Hebrew scriptures, and the concept of the God whom Jesus calls ‘Abba’, ‘Father’, depicted in the New.

Here I focus on the anthropomorphism apparent in the description of and attributes used in describing God and his intimate relationship with his people, with humankind depicted in Genesis as being made in his image and likeness. Some attention needs to be given concerning the kind of language we use about God, i.e., should we speak about 'him' in anthropomorphic terms, or treat the divine as ineffable and inexpressible in human language? Whilst from a religious studies viewpoint it might seem more appropriate to explore how human beings have conceptualised and represented God, and how those representations change and are contested over time, we must acknowledge that clearly within the Christian tradition, and in its foundational document the Bible, there is much anthropomorphic language about God, both in the Old and New Testaments. One could argue this approach to anthropomorphic language about God is justifiable because of the central Christian claim that: 'The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth' (John 1.14).

I will be working from within the Christian tradition, and my approach to the Christian theology of laughter and of its use as a 'word against death' will necessarily be refracted through this lens. But if we ask a highly anthropomorphic question about God, i.e., 'Does God laugh?', it might be considered by some to be inappropriate, or even ludicrous. However, this may be a legitimate question to ask, especially if we ask the parallel question: 'Did Jesus laugh?' Most likely he did, which perhaps makes asking the highly anthropomorphic question about God himself not seem so ludicrous, given the deep incarnational strand embedded in Christian theology from the earliest times.

Laughter, humour, and joy are not necessarily one and the same thing, although, of course, there are potential mutual relationships, but derisive laughter can be without joy, and deep joy can be felt without laughter. In the Bible, not only are these characteristics of human beings noted, but are asserted in both Judaism and Christianity to pertain to God. Beginning with the Hebrew Bible, I look for and review the evidence for laughter, either explicit or implicit. It is in the context of the ongoing dialogue between God and humankind presented in the texts and seen through the

events of history, as well as through the role of God's prophets, which enables us to seek to discern that humour and laughter, both on God's part, and that of his chosen people Israel. I then move to review possible evidence for laughter in the New Testament writings, particularly focusing on Jesus and his disciples as presented in the gospels.

The incidence and episodes relating to laughter in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament are few and far between, making the development of a theology of laughter more problematical for biblical scholars. Such laughter as is evidenced there, can be perceived in many ways more akin to the superior and derisive laughter we find in many narratives concerning the gods of Greece and Rome, although I readily acknowledge there is laughter of all kinds in Greek and Roman texts, and it is not always derisive. My primary focus is on the scriptures.

Bishop Tom Wright in his Foreword *God and Humour* in *Does God LOL?* (ed. F. Mulgrew, 2013), notes:

> Jewish humour … is often born out of desperation. When things are bad, the only way to survive is to see the funny side. … There are times when the Bible quite accidentally gives you the one-liner you need for a particular moment. … We ought to expect humour in the Bible, because the Bible tells the story of how all life has somehow got out of joint, has become absurd. … Humour is what happens when things come together incongruously. … The Bible is about God coming into the middle of that incongruous, out-of-joint world. … Hence Jesus' mixture of stand-up comedy and street theatre. … Of course God's coming into the world is desperately sad as well. There is nothing funny about Jesus' crucifixion. However, tears and laughter, … are very close. They are part of the clue to being genuinely human. … tears and laughter are key ways in which we humans remind ourselves, and one another, that life is out of joint, and that its okay to recognise it. (2013. 9-12)

I suggest this is none more so when we are confronted by death, where laughter as well as tears provide the release of 'words against death', with Wright reminding us we are: 'messed-up creatures … but still greatly loved by our creator' (2013.13).

Recent research by Melissa A. Jackson (2012) argues comedy is both relative, linked in time and culture, and universal, found pervasively across time and culture, and that the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible contains comedy of this relative, yet universal nature.

She therefore engages with the Hebrew Bible via a comic reading, dividing comic elements into categories of literary devices, and psychological/social features and functions, bringing those readings into conversation with feminist-critical interpretation when examining a number of biblical characters for evidence of these comic elements. Jackson acknowledges the use of comedy as an interpretive lens for the Hebrew Bible is not without difficulties for feminist interpretation, requiring resistance to any lingering stereotype that comedy is fundamentally non-serious, or that feminist critique is fundamentally unsmiling. Similarly in looking at the biblical texts, not all incidents of laughter or humour in them can be qualified as a potential 'word against death', and indeed are also few, and not always readily discerned.

I believe that of fundamental importance in developing a theology of laughter is the way in which the Old Testament writers frequently ascribe human traits and human attributes to God, be they bodily features or human faculties. Accordingly, our basic theological and religious beliefs find expression in anthropomorphic descriptions. As Richard Cote notes: 'at no time do they [the Hebrew authors] use abstract or philosophical terms to speak of God' (1986.40). This anthropomorphic envisaging of the divine is not unique to Judaism, but is evidenced in the contemporaneous Greek culture in Plato's *Phaedrus*, where his Socrates notes:

> An earthly body, which appears to be self-moving because of the power of soul that is in it, and this combination of soul and body is given the name of a living being and is termed mortal. There is not a single sound reason for positing the existence of such a being who is immortal, but because we have never seen or formed an adequate idea of a god, we picture him to ourselves as a being of the same kind as ourselves but immortal, a combination of soul and body indissolubly joined for ever. The existence of such beings and the use of such language about them we must leave to the will of God. (1995.30)

The tendency to allegorize and spiritualize these human descriptions of God come only from the later post-biblical period within Judaism, and in the corresponding developments in Christian theology of the first centuries, such as from Origen and other early Christian writers. The Hebrew language lent itself quite readily to this earlier tradition of anthropomorphic God-talk, and certainly, backing up my supposition here, Cote considers: 'the difference between a living God and a lifeless idol is crucial for understanding what the biblical writers wanted to express in their descriptions of Yahweh' (1986.41). But of more particular concern for me in this thesis is not its origin, but rather its theological significance. Human-like attributes and faculties are described

with an emphasis which is verbal rather than pictorial – God could speak and be spoken to, but rarely (almost never) seen.

Whilst it was strictly prohibited in Judaism to make any image or material representation of Yahweh (Exodus 20.4; 20.22; Deuteronomy 4.12; 15.18), nonetheless the concept of the living God of Israel goes to the heart of this biblical anthropomorphism, for it describes God's attributes and faculties in fully human terms, and is almost entirely verbal in character. However, here some slight qualification becomes necessary, because although scripture asserts that 'man shall not see God and live', in the creation story in the opening chapters of Genesis, it does not definitively state whether or not Adam and Eve could actually see God, so as to know or assert that they were made in the image and likeness of God as the scripture conjectures (Genesis 1.27). But this particular early mythological and foundational account clearly asserts God spoke to them. Here, following the serpent's temptation of Eve (and through her Adam), the text relates how when they heard God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, they hid themselves, realising they were in fact naked before God, and clearly ashamed. But in banishing them from that original state of innocent intimacy with God which Eden indicates and represents, God made garments of skin to clothe them (Genesis 3.21), indicating or suggesting some actual physical contact and sight.

Certainly the three angelic visitors to Abraham and Sarah at Mamre in Genesis 18 were visible to them both, and some commentators think Yahweh was one of them (as discussed shortly). In Genesis 32.22-32 we are presented with the episode where Jacob wrestles with an unknown individual by the ford of the Jabbok stream. Having fled from Laban with his family and possessions, and sent his household across the stream to safety, he is left alone, knowing the next day he must face his elder brother Esau, whom he had defrauded of his birthright by an act of deception. Alone, this adversary wrestled with Jacob until daybreak, and dislocated Jacob's hip, but now disabled and disadvantaged, Jacob will not let go until the stranger has blessed him. The stranger refuses to give his name, but when Jacob gives his, he is told 'Your name will no longer be Jacob (meaning "supplanter"), but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome', and receives a blessing (Genesis.32.28). Jacob realises he has been wrestling with God in the form of an angel, calling the place Peniel, saying: "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared"' (Genesis 32. 29, 30). The Hebrew *Peniel* translates as 'The face of God'. The text indicates that Jacob had struggled all his life to prevail, firstly with Esau, and now with Laban, but from hereon it is God who holds his destiny, and God he must henceforth

wrestle with. Having acknowledged God as the source of blessing, the Lord acknowledges Jacob (those who struggle with men, and overcome), by changing his name to Israel (and with it the name of his people and their characterisation): Israel, (the people who struggle with God). God is clearly demonstrated here in unambiguous anthropomorphic terms, and is claimed to have been seen by Jacob/Israel face to face. Stuart Lasine's article in the *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament (JSOT)* (September 2010, vol. 35, 1, pp.31-62) (www.jot.sagepub.com) highlights how God attacks the person to whom he appears, but in this incident, Jacob successfully wrestles a blessing out of God. Elsewhere, particularly in the Psalms, God is described in anthropomorphic terms as defending Israel with 'arm outstretched and mighty hand'.

From thereon the God of Israel is not 'seen', although his intimate relationship with Moses, from the episode of the mysterious burning bush from which God called to him, through to his times with God both on the holy mountain, as well as in the tent of meeting, would seem to indicate that Moses (whose face shone after these experiences), came closest to seeing God, and indeed the narrative mentions one particular incident where Moses glimpses God (albeit only from behind as God passed by) (Exodus 33.23). At his death, Deuteronomy 34.10 (RSV) records: 'And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face'.

The call of the boy Samuel at Shiloh (1 Samuel 3), affirms that after calling three times, 'The Lord then came and stood by, calling as he had done before, "Samuel! Samuel!'', but it remains open to interpretation as to whether Samuel actually saw God here. Even Elijah, considered the greatest of the prophets, did not actually see God, for on Mount Horeb, he only experienced the presence of God in the "still small voice" that followed on after the thunder, earthquake, and fire. The call to prophecy Isaiah received in Jerusalem in Isaiah 6 records: 'In the year that King Uzziah died I *saw* the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple', a vision very clearly described in anthropomorphic terms, with Isaiah's response: 'Woe is me! For I am lost, … for my eyes have *seen* the King, the Lord of hosts!' (Isaiah 6. 1, 5). The Book of Job (incorporated into the Hebrew Bible) records not only an extensive dialogue between God and Job, with God answering Job out of the whirlwind (Job 38.1). In the final chapter, Job acknowledges his ignorance, stating: 'I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye *sees* thee' (Job 42.5 RSV), indicating Job may have been privileged to actually see God for himself. In establishing and highlighting above the perceived anthropomorphic nature of the God of Israel in the Old Testament, such laughter as is evidenced, is understood by the biblical writers in anthropomorphic terms.

When extended on into the New Testament writings, I argue this anthropomorphism takes on a whole new meaning within the context of Christian belief by linking Jesus of Nazareth with the promised Messiah, the Christ of God, whom Jesus addresses intimately as ‘Father’, and teaches his disciples to use that same intimacy in the words of the Lord’s Prayer. John’s Gospel clearly affirms that in Jesus we see God’s love, law, grace, and kingdom not only preached, but personified, by one whose life and teachings (as portrayed and presented in each of the gospel accounts), show those very relational human qualities attributed to God in the earlier (Hebrew) biblical writings, which are now to be found in Jesus, personified and made flesh. Accepted by his disciples as the Christ of God, Jesus is presented and portrayed in the gospel narratives as fully reflecting all the traits and attributes which pertain to our human life and existence, which must include the possibility of that very human instinct and unexplained spontaneity for the gift of laughter and humour inherent in the human condition. Those gospel accounts depict a very human Jesus, one who, I would argue, could laugh, as underlying evidence seems to me to indicate, one who could share a laugh with his friends in a way that is universally common and natural to all of humankind, giving further justification for the development of a Christian theology of laughter.

Until Jesus came, no-one was considered superior to Moses; however, in New Testament terms as found in Hebrews 3.1-6, Moses is seen as the “servant”, whereas Christ is seen as the “Son”. Here in Jesus is one who could indeed see and be seen, speak and be spoken to. But what were God’s people to make of him? A concept that gives this clear focus is to be found in a doctrine of the Incarnation as expounded in the New Testament and as developed in Christian belief, where, according to John’s Gospel, in the birth of Jesus ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth’ (John 1.14). It is the significance of Jesus as the Christ, ‘as of the only Son from the Father’, that John affirms: ‘No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known’ (John 1.18 RSV), with Jesus himself asserting to Philip: ‘He who has seen me has seen the Father’ (John 14.9 RSV). So it is the very humanity of Jesus that now reflects the substance and nature of the Father, which must therefore include his laughter, and the focus in which the context of death is to be viewed for evidence of laughter as a ‘word against death’. Christian doctrine asserts that at his ascension, Jesus continues to bear his humanity together with his divinity, and in the dominical sacraments of the Church, now shares his divinity with us in our humanity, both at our baptism, and in the communion gifts at the Eucharistic feast.

Cote comments: ‘Everything in the Bible is ultimately meaningful only as the Word of God: creation, election, promise, covenant, prophecy, and hope in the future. Through God's Word, and this Word alone, we come to know something of God's love, law, grace, and kingdom’ (1986.43). Whilst I concur with Cote’s analysis, I would highlight his laughter. Here is evidence of an ongoing relationship between God and humankind, the very essence of this biblical anthropomorphism, providing a dialogue that makes a theology of laughter possible, precisely through these very relational human qualities attributed to God in the biblical writings. The initial anthropomorphism found in the Old Testament seeks to express the fundamental religious belief of the people of Israel, as is, for example, witnessed by their lively faith in a living God, one who is personal to them as his chosen people, and one whom they clearly perceive remains everlastingly in touch with them.

I have selected certain Old Testament texts in which the key persons laugh or are laughed at or laughed with, and in chapter three will consider the New Testament writings, with a particular focus upon the Gospels, and the way in which Jesus of Nazareth (and those around him) would seem to employ humour, as I believe is presented in both Jesus’ teaching, and in the various events which the Gospels relate. John Morreall (in a response to Hershey Friedman) asserted that the Hebrew Bible lacks a comic vision of life; moreover: ‘the God of the Bible has no sense of humour’ (*Humor,* 14 (2001), 293-301 [301]). However, I believe there is implicit evidence to suggest God may be ascribed a sense of humour, and that this is evident in some biblical material to be examined, as both Cote and Kuschel concur.

Melissa Jackson highlights some of the objections raised against a study of comedy (and by extension of humour and laughter), being the difficulty of accurate translation and original context, suggesting: ‘Ancient Israelite humour is unlikely to survive the punishing move from Hebrew to English’; also that viewing the material through the lens of comedy is a pervasive view, given the Bible is regarded as strictly ‘serious’ business, and humour perceived: ‘as unworthy of the majesty of God’ (2012.30). She considers using comedy as an aid to biblical interpretation risks: ‘imposing later and perhaps alien schemas on the ancient biblical literature’ (as Whedbee suggests); and we should be aware: ‘Comedy, as recognizable in *this* time and culture, was formed and defined in a context much later than that of the writing of the Hebrew Bible’ (with an inevitable distance between an ancient Israelite sense of humour and a contemporary Western one) (2012.31). There is also the danger of overlaying a more recent interpretative tool onto an ancient text, to the extent that Yair Zakovitch in an article ([Tragedy] and [Comedy] in the Bible, *Semeia*, 32 (1984), 107-114) suggests the strictly

limited definitions of ‘comedy’ and ‘tragedy’ as forms borrowed from Greek drama remain: ‘entirely alien to biblical literature’, since they are: ‘principles imported from outside the world of the Bible’ (2012.31). However, Jackson notes the Hebrew language in not without words related to humour; given that ‘laugh’ is embedded in the name if one of its patriarchs, and comedy has been found as a universal phenomenon among societies across time and culture, with Soren Kierkegaard noting: ‘Wherever there is life, there is contradiction, and where there is contradiction, the comical is present’ (In Morreall (ed.) *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour.* 83-89, in *Taking Laughter Seriously* [1983.83]) (2012.34).

Stephen Halliwell suggests: 'the Old Testament exhibits a wider, less filtered range of attitudes to laughter than can be found in the New' (2008.479), citing T. Baconsky's survey of Old Testament references to laughter (1996.31-53), A. Brenner (1990) on Hebrew semantics (stressing the derisive end of the spectrum), and Kuschel (1992.109-116). Halliwell notes how Yahweh was thought capable of laughing, albeit predominantly with menacing scorn for evildoers, and considers that a further layer in the divine endorsement of laughter is contributed by the motif of God's gift of laughter (the 'filling of mouths' with it) to those he favours, whereby human characters can even laugh in response to God's own actions (2008.479). However, he notes the Old Testament equates laughter chiefly with aggressive mockery, this being a common theme in Proverbs where laughter is associated with folly, evil, pride and strife, and that religiously grounded satire on human frailty is present in the authorial voices of more than one Old Testament book (e.g. Proverbs 1.22 [and Wisdom in 1.26], 9.7-8, 13.1-3, 14.6-9, 21.24, 22.10, and Wisdom 5.4) (2008.480). However, given that much of the laughter in the Old Testament is of a mocking, superior, and derisive variety, that negative and destructive laughter of superiority, of mocking and derision found in some of the Psalms and various other Old Testament writings, I will need to consider what potential role, purpose, insight, and implications this might possibly play in developing a Christian theology of laughter.

The Old Testament/Hebrew Bible

In considering the biblical narrative contained in both the Old (Hebrew) and New (Greek) Testaments, which together provide us with the foundation documents for Christianity, Karl-Josef Kuschel identifies three basic motifs of laughter to be discerned there, namely:-

- The human being who laughs at God.

- The God who laughs at the rulers and the wicked.

- The one who laughs at the 'fool', whose laughter is simply a reflection of fatal self-deception about his situation.

Whilst these motifs may serve as a guide in our consideration of biblical texts, they do not seem to me to support a clear Christian theology of laughter as such, in that they indicate a predominantly mocking and derisive laughter, which might at first seem a rather alien concept when compared to the general thrust of the New Testament writings and the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. However, a more helpful and supportive category I would add to Kuschel's list concerns the human being who laughs with God, the primary example of which can be found in the story of Abraham and Sarah, to which we now turn.

Abraham, Sarah and Isaac in the Book of Genesis

The first example of the human being who laughs at God is related in Genesis 18, where Abraham and his wife Sarah unknowingly offer hospitality to their three unexpected angelic visitors, in return for which and their faithfulness to Yahweh, they are told that Sarah will bear him a child of promise, even though Abraham himself is an old man (described as one as good as dead), and Sarah similarly elderly (well past the usual age of child-bearing). This is a key moment in religious history, when laughter first comes to the fore. Is there Abraham's joyful and trusting laughter witnessing to his faith in the promises of God upon being told of the forthcoming child of promise, whereby he will become the father of a multitude of nations? And what of Sarah's more sceptical, incredulous and doubting laughter on overhearing the angelic prediction and promise? Later will come a happy laughter of joy when the child is born to her in old age, and named Isaac, one whose very name means 'laughter', or ‘God laughs’. But this story is somewhat more complex than perhaps this brief thumbnail description suggests, requiring a more extensive treatment.

In Genesis 17 the Lord appears to Abram (aged ninety-nine), and makes a covenant with him that if he walks before him blamelessly, he shall become the father of a multitude of nations, and that kings shall come forth from him; and the bodily circumcision of every male in his household will be the sign of this covenant. He is given a new name Abraham in view of his new task (17.5), and told his wife Sarai (who now becomes Sarah, a dialectal variant in view of the new role she will play [17.15b]), will be blessed and given a son (17.16), a child of promise, to succeed him in the covenant now being established (and not his son Ishmael by Sarah’s Egyptian maid

and bond-servant Hagar). Claus Westermann in his *Commentary on Genesis* (1986) sees this action as bringing Sarah into this covenant and promise, thereby preparing the way for the special place of Isaac over against Ishmael. This promise indicates salvation before death without children, with both blessing and increase linked together in this way. Westermann considers the child of that promise will provide the enduring continuity and future hope contained in God's covenant, to give that 'salvation before death without children', and the one whose name means 'laughter', will in his birth (and with that enshrined laughter his name encapsulates), prove to be in himself a 'word against death', with the underlying promise of this new life triumphing over the finality of childless death.

Richard J. Clifford in his contribution to *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1989, hereafter *NJBC*), sees Genesis 17 as one of two extended compositions of the so-called 'Priestly writer' (one of the four supposed authors of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old testament), which gathers the major motifs of the story so far and sets them squarely within the covenant now being established, and linking in with the first covenant made with Noah, differentiating it from God's promise concerning Ishmael. That covenant will continue through Isaac (literally "May God laugh in delight, smile upon!", which Clifford considers to be a word-play on Abraham's laugh) (1989.22, Sect.2.26).

We are told: 'Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? And shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?' (17.17 AV). Westermann sees the news as provoking a reaction of doubt on Abraham's part, but his falling to the ground (despite the doubt), signifies a reverent acceptance. He considers Abraham's laughter has something of the bizarre about it, in this immediate confrontation with God who is making a marvellous promise to him. For Westermann, the meaning of Isaac's name is most intimately connected with the promise of a son, and that Abraham's incredulous laughter indicates unbelief in this promise. But Abraham's immediate concern is to plead that his existing son Ishmael, born to Hagar, might live in God's sight (17.18). Westermann thinks the Priestly writer here wants to emphasize that God fulfils his promise without it being bound to Abraham's faith, and what God has promised he does, independently of human attitudes. It is though as yet Abraham cannot comprehend the extent of the promise "I will be your God" and its associated covenant granted to him, the confirmation and continuation of which will be in the bloodline of the couple extended through Isaac, distinguishing it very clearly from that of Ishmael.

Westermann, like Clifford, also considers that Genesis 17 forms the centre of the patriarchal story in the Priestly writings, giving a necessary place and meaning in the Priestly literary work as a whole, noting: ‘The history of the promise, which continues right through the Old Testament and links the New with the Old, is fused with the promise of salvation (Exodus 3); the promised child is the saviour’ (1986.282). Gerhard von Rad in his *Commentary* (1961) thinks: ‘Abraham’s laugh brings us ... to the outer limits of what is psychologically possible. Combined with the pathetic gesture of reverence in an almost horrible laugh, deadly earnest, not in fun, bringing belief and unbelief close together’, whereby the promise: ‘was so paradoxical that he laughed involuntarily’ (1961.198).

In Genesis 18.1-16a, the episode following, once again the Lord appeared to Abraham, but this time three men stood in front of him, whom Abraham greets with an act of obeisance, bowing himself to the earth, before offering them hospitality in his tent: water to wash their feet, and shade to rest under the trees, before rushing to Sarah (unseen in the tent) for her to prepare a meal for their guests to set before them. Andrei Rublev (or Robilev), in his famous icon of this episode (circa 1410, created for the Monastic Church of St Sergius, now in the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow), depicts these three angelic figures, two of whom will subsequently depart to deal with the problem of Sodom and Gomorrah (18.16). Clifford in the *NJBC* describes both the nearness and the mysterious elusiveness of God, noting ‘The hitherto silent guests, … now dominate the scene by their questions, all of them about Sarah’ (1989.23, section 2.28). Whilst many scholars have assumed that Yahweh is one of the three, von Rad is inclined to think that Yahweh appeared in all three, given the certain unclearness in his relationship to the three (1961.200). While they eat, they enquire after Sarah, before Yahweh promises to return to Abraham in the spring, when Sarah shall have a son. Sarah, listening at the tent door, laughed to herself with incredulity at the prospect, given both their advanced ages (18.9-12).

Westermann notes how the promise of a son encounters not gratitude and joy, but scepticism and doubt. It is meant for Sarah, and it is she who reacts to it. Westermann thinks whilst it is addressed to Abraham, Sarah has to hear it, because her reaction is to be narrated, and accordingly from verse 10 it seems obvious to him that she is the leading figure. Whilst Sarah ‘laughed to herself’, this does not mean her laughter could not be heard, since, as B. Jacobs noted, “laughter is not something internal – there is no such laughter”. The Lord (presumably Yahweh) questions this expression of disbelief asking “Why did Sarah laugh?”, and with a counter-question “Is anything too hard for the Lord?”, thereby indicating the announcement she has overheard had come

from none other than Yahweh. Despite her laughter, Clifford notes it is Yahweh himself who reiterates the promise of a child in the following spring and rebukes Sarah (18.13-14) (1989.23). Clearly in her laughter Sarah seems initially unaware of the true nature of their guests, and exactly who it is she is laughing at. Only when she realises her mistake does she become anxious and deny that she laughed (aware that no-one may laugh at God with impunity). Sarah, in fear, then denies having laughed, by what von Rad describes as a “white lie”, but is challenged: “No, but you did laugh” (18.15), reminding her that the laughter remains a fact. Von Rad thinks the guests betray their divine knowledge by reproaching the thoughts of Sarah, whom they could neither see nor hear, since she was behind the tent door. However, he believes: ‘Sarah did not basically renounce Yahweh with conscious unbelief; her laughter is rather a psychological understandable incident’ (1961.202). Kuschel comments:

> Sarah perceives a promise for the future, compares it with her reality and notes a discrepancy which is so great as to be comical. ...the character of the laugh is not one of perplexity or despair, but one of doubt... a laugh of incredulity, without conflicting with the promises. (1994.49, 50)

It appears Sarah is not the only one to laugh at God – and get away with it – for in the previous chapter (see Genesis 17.16) we are told Abraham had similarly fallen upon his face, and laughed. Whilst falling down on his face may be regarded as a gesture of humility in God's presence, it could also be to hide the laughter on his face, and like Sarah's reaction, be a laughter of incredulity and scepticism, given their advanced ages. Either way, given the general expectation in the Old Testament was that to laugh at God was likely to be punished by death, this example might be construed as indicating Yahweh may also have a sense of humour (at least in tolerating the laughter of Abraham and Sarah here), with laughter proving effectively a ‘word against death’, when death might have been expected. Old Testament scholar Walter Goss commented: ‘The Abraham prostrate in worship before God and yet laughing at the same time is one of the most inscrutable images in Holy Scripture’ (1980.36), and Kuschel comments: 'inscrutable because here “faith” manifestly presents itself in the garb of laughing doubt of God' (1994.51).

St Paul in Romans recalls this particular episode, but puts a different interpretation and gloss on Abraham's faith and reaction: 'No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God' (Rom.4.19f). For Kuschel, the anthropological point of this story is that laughter expresses the doubting unbelief of human beings in the promises of God, and that in Abraham and

Sarah, we have people who can evidently laugh at God with impunity (1994.51), suggesting: 'Thus they both embody a theology of laughter in which human beings are also taken seriously in their unbelief in God... Human beings are not punished for their laughter, but are given by God what they declared to be impossible in their doubting laughter' (1994.52). Kuschel considers God sees himself as being above all this, in that he ignores the human unbelief expressed in laughter and renews his promise to Sarah that she will bear a child and fulfil the promise of the covenant to Isaac and his descendants (Genesis 17.18f). So, after the birth of her son Isaac, Sarah can say in overflowing happiness: 'God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me' (Genesis 21.6). Her son is to be called Isaac, a literal translation of which is 'God laughs' (1994.52). I consider Kuschel's comments here are important, since they undoubtedly contribute towards constructing a theology of laughter.

Ingvild Gilhus believes the incongruity between God's reaction to Sarah's laughter and his reaction to Abraham's was explained away by later commentators by considering: 'Abraham did not laugh out of disbelief, but because he was so astonished and happy' (Resnick 1987.91). When one year later Sarah bore Isaac, she thinks: 'God's omnipotence triumphed over the disbelieving woman. The name Isaac illustrates the point, being connected with the Hebrew word for laughter' (1997.24). Regarding Sarah's words at Isaac's birth, Gilhus suggests two different meanings of laughter could be reflected; either happy and joyful, or more derisive, and questions whether those who hear about the birth to one so old will laugh *with* Sarah, or *at* her, reading the text as multisemic and noting:

> The Hebrew expression is ambiguous and has been interpreted in both ways (von Rad 1972.230-1). Is the old woman joyfully surprised or ashamed to have become a mother? The ambiguity of the text reflects that laughter is an open symbol, not easily restricted to one meaning. (1997.25)

James Martin also points out the child of promise, Isaac, in Hebrew *Yitzhak,* means either “He (God) laughs” or “He will laugh”, emphasizing how Sarah's story shows not only how laughter and hospitality are intimately bound together in the first book of the Bible, but suggesting:

> Laughter is encoded into the spiritual DNA of the three great monotheistic religions, all of which recognise Abraham and Sarah as forebears in faith. In that foundational story is combined humour, hospitality, and holiness. … Humour is a unique way of showing hospitality. (2011.104, 106)

Kuschel considers that here:

> A shift can be recognised in this story of Abraham and Sarah: from sceptical laughter at God to the liberating laughter of everyone with God. The theological point of this story consists in the recognition that God allows even human laughter about God. It need not be suppressed or morally condemned – as in the history of Christian monasticism. Scripture itself does not exclude the comical, the laughable and doubt from the sphere of the holy. On the contrary, here is talk of a God who himself tolerates the laughing doubt of human beings and in the end turns it into … the liberating laughter of human beings with their God. (1994.52, 53)

Here again I consider Kuschel provides an important justification for the development of a theology of laughter. In this particular debate, Michael Screech concludes:

> God gave divine sanction to such laughter, but perhaps no other. Many in positions of power and authority never accepted laughter as a vehicle for Christian joy, Christian preaching, or the propagation of Christian truth ... they sought to censor, to suppress, to burn book or author. Some never understood what such laughter implied. Some even amongst the censors understood, and laughed despite themselves; others understood, and snarled. (1997.xxiii)

Screech considers this divine sanction for laughter found in this episode as one of God's gifts to humankind. In looking at the biblical material for evidence of laughter, we need to understand what such evidence implies, both at the time it was written, and now within our contemporary world and in the context of Christian propagation of the Gospel.

To summarize, in this Genesis account of Abraham and Sarah we find that Yahweh not only permits but accepts the validity of the couple's doubting and sceptical laughter. That laughter is answered in the promised gift of a child, one whose name is laughter, a laughter in the face of human doubt and uncertainty, and a laughter in the face of death itself when childless death seemed the likely outcome for this couple. The covenant made with Abraham is thereby renewed in promised continuity into the foreseeable future. The couple therefore laugh at God and with God without any hint of retribution or punishment, and in their child of promise laugh with God in perpetuity, what Kuschel describes as a liberating joyful laughter with God (1994.53), and the sort of accepting laughter Cote suggests is a *sacred* mystery (1986.20).

Here we first find evidence for laughter in the Hebrew Bible, of human beings who laugh (albeit with incredulity, given their age) at God's promise of a child, and of succeeding generations to inherit the covenant God has made with Abraham, but with it the promise of life and regeneration to fly in the face of death, and to be a 'word against death'. Abraham and Sarah laugh at God, but not resulting in the death and destruction that might have been expected to ensue, but with the gift of a child of promise, and with him of succession and enduring continuity to future generations, whereby God laughs with them in fulfilling his promise and purpose. Here I would argue laughter as an expression of incredulity in this instance plays an important part in the theology of laughter, where, as here, a space can be created for God to act against the very natural laws and limitations he himself created. This laughter is indeed a 'word against death'. Do we not see here the laughter of Abraham and Sarah with God's complicity proving to be 'words against death'? After this extended treatment of the Abraham-and-Sarah episode, we now move on to the Book of Job.

The Book of Job

In the Book of Job, which some scholars believe originates from that wider regional cultural background, given the presence of what R.A.F. MacKenzie, in his commentary in the *NJBC* sees as 'Canaanisms and Aramaisms' (Canaanite influences and Aramaic linguistic features) in the more unusual and rare words used in the script (1989.467, 30.3), we consider the profound theological problem of the meaning of suffering in the life of this clearly just and upright man. He is told 'happy is the man whom God reproves', or given some vague hope of future joy in his present pitiful plight. Job is being tested, but not mocked by God, and the irony and paradoxes used in an attempt to challenge and approach divine truth rest ultimately in God and his good providence before equilibrium is found and the trusting relationship between Job and his Creator is restored, but throughout the narrative God continues to have a care and concern for righteous Job. But here again, any laughter is no 'word against death'. Whilst Job has his fortunes restored, and his is given another seven sons and three daughters, and lives long enough to see his sons and his sons' sons, four generations (Job 42.13-15), it does not entirely compensate him for the loss of his original children, who perished in the opening chapter. Again we find little of positive value to develop a theology of laughter, and no evidence of laughter used as a 'word against death'.

MacKenzie (as revised by Roland E. Murphy), highlights how the poetic dialogue in chapters 3-31 deals with the profound theological problem of the meaning of suffering in the life of a just man. Many scholars believe the author seeks to show a more

adequate concept of the relationship of humanity to its loving creator than might be apparent in Job's dialogue with his three 'friends', who seem intent on being eloquent defenders of the "traditional" view of divine retribution. Likening this to the dialogue found in Ezekiel 14. 14, 20, which Carl Jung saw as a crude representation of a divinity who cruelly permits the torture of his creation, the author of Job seeks to show this is a doctrine which is simply inadequate (1989.467, 30.5). MacKenzie and Murphy point out the book is full of irony and paradoxes in its attempts to approach divine truth, something beyond human reach, that ultimately God must reveal and tease out of Job in his response (1989.467, 30.6). But Abigail Pelham (*JSOT* March 2012) suggests it is Job who effectively forces God to answer him, and his call for God's response is a ruse, based on his experience of God's silence and absence. In a further article, Pelham (*JSOT* September 2010) comments on William Whedbee's 1977 claim that the Book of Job is a comedy, noting the contrast between tragedy's portrayal of humankind as noble, with comedy's portrayal of humans as fools. In contrast, Pauline Shelton (*JSOT* June 1999) questions whether the Book of Job may have originated as a drama, suggested by its three-act structure, its use of a play-within-a-play device, noting how it passes beyond this primal scream to reveal truths of incarnation and redemption, whereas Donald E. Gowan's article entitled *Reading Job as a 'Wisdom Script'* (*JSOT* September 1992) takes a more traditional line, whilst Geoffrey Aimers (*JSOT* December 2000) sees the book as equivalent to a political satire, challenging the view that Job is a Wisdom text concerned with universal themes.

However one regards it, Kuschel discerns two distinctive and opposite modes of laughter portrayed here. Job's friends, who come to visit him in his pitiable plight, try to offer him some comfort in the future, which Kuschel describes as: 'laughter as eschatological, ultimate reality' (1994.59). I argue this concept of 'laughter as eschatological, ultimate reality' will apply to the resurrection of Jesus, which, in constructing a theology of laughter, is the ultimate reality, and the ultimate 'word against death'. Eliphaz tells Job: "Behold, happy is the man whom God reproves; therefore do not despise the chastening of the Almighty" (Job 4.17, RSV), as though one day God will reward the one he has chastened, and the sufferer will live to laugh again. Similar thoughts are expressed by Bildad of Shuah, who adds: "He will fill your mouth with laughter, your mouth and your lips with shouting" (Job 8.21, RSV). In this rhetoric of consolation, Job is offered some hope for the future, and some consolation in his despair, and that eventually laughter will reward him for his present torment. We find a similar theme taken up in Psalm 126, of mouths filled with laughter and shouts of joy, where "those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy". But it seems little

consolation in Job's plight.

Norman C. Habel in his Commentary (in the SCM *Old Testament Library* series, 1985) draws attention to Job 9. 14-23 where Job contemplates a situation where El (God) is summoned to court to answer a suit which Job brings against him, in which Job alleges that El is arbitrary in his execution of justice (1985. 192-4). Whilst Job has lived a "blameless and upright life" before God, he questions why God deprives the innocent of their happiness, and why, 'without reason', God has multiplied his 'wounds', and filled him 'with bitterness' (Job 9.17f), adding: "When disaster brings sudden death, he mocks at the calamity of the innocent" (Job 9.23). It is as though he thinks God is laughing at innocent Job's anxiety. Kuschel sees God's laughter as: 'enigmatically inscrutable', and that he: 'laughs at the anxiety of the innocent', but in the end he is not the: 'enigmatic arbitrary God that he first seemed to be to Job' (1994.61, 62). In Job 38-41, God challenges Job out of the whirlwind; "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" He appears to mock him: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Who determined its measurements - surely you know!" Commenting on these four chapters, Habel considers Yahweh's defence of his Cosmic Design provide us with speeches that are majestic poems, rich in lyric artistry, literary ambiguity, and theological profundity. Job's ignorance can be seen to be laughable, but is ultimately not held against him. A repentant Job finally acknowledges: "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know" (Job 42.3). However, by the time the book concludes, Job perceives God has not been laughing at him, but putting matters right, so that the relationship of trust between Job and his Creator has been restored.

Jonah

Anthony R. Ceresko in his commentary in *NJBC* believes the author of Jonah is not intent on presenting us with a historical account, but rather to highlight primarily the mercy and justice of God. He believes the central role given to God indicates that a primary motivation is theological, and has a didactic function as well, and may be compared with that of a parable, and that in Jonah, one of the last representations of a prophetic figure, we find not someone of heroic status, but a caricature of a prophet (1989, 39.2, p.580). He considers the book as a whole emphasises the possibility and desirability of repentance, as well as the merciful and forgiving nature of God (1989, 39.3, p.581). Rob Barrett (*JSOT* December 2012) argues the book focuses less on YHWH's (or Yahweh) relationship with Nineveh, than on pressing Jonah to recognise YHWH's compassion for him. In the entire world of the book, Jonah is the only one who

appears to be unresponsive to YHWH. Cote considers the Book of Jonah to be a droll story full of irony, surprise, and divine laughter, as it tells of a reluctant foot-dragging prophet who tries hard to evade God's calling to go to preach to the people of Nineveh.

The entire book reads like a succession of practical jokes that God plays upon his reluctant prophet. Cote notes the singular feature of what he sees as this parable lies not only in its humour, but in the distinctive kind of humour attributed to God. Here we see God's humour at its playful best, continually taking its cue from Jonah's sullen behavior, and mischievously challenging, coaxing, teasing, and outwitting the prophet only to have the last laugh. Here at last seems a more playful and humorous God, and a book giving greater scope to develop a theology of laughter. Cote's suggestion: 'God's tongue-in-cheek humour is present everywhere in the Bible' (1986.51), is a remark I believe it would be difficult to justify in most instances in many of the books in the Hebrew Bible, and indeed more specifically in some of the material reviewed in this chapter, but which is something certainly apparent in this particular Old Testament book. Jonah is not in the least bit joyful about Nineveh and its people being spared, but their response to his call to repentance has proved a 'word against death', leading a God who gently mocks and chides his prophet to relent and spare them.

But surely, if anywhere in the Old Testament, this story of Jonah may indicate that God has a sense of humour. Jonah has no right to be angry when his preaching at Nineveh has elicited such success, and indeed this has actually proved to be very effective as a 'word against death'. God's humour seems to have the last laugh, and is in its turn a 'word against death'. So I believe here we find God's subtle humour and laughter, and may just glimpse a God who has a sense of humour, one whose acts of forgiveness, mercy, and justice can be restorative and liberate from fear.

The Laughter of Mockery, Scorn, and Derision

We now turn to those Old Testament books and passages that would seem rather negative when it comes to developing a Christian theology of laughter. Perhaps it should not be surprising that this laughter from the ancient world is similar and in many ways reflects the sentiments of much of the surviving literature remaining to scholarship from Ancient Greece. Barry Sanders (1995) notes whilst joyous laughter (Isaac) descends as a divine gift from Yahweh, all too often, like the Greek gods, he expresses his profound displeasure through powerful and searing laughter (1995.59). He notes how Homer even reserves a special adjective for derisive laughter, *asbestos*, "unquenchable", in that it behaves like the highest of the four elements, a most

powerful weapon, burning with such intensity that nothing can extinguish it (1995.64). In Sanders' opinion scornful laughter holds much more potential for dramatic action than joyous laughter even can, noting:

> No one can remain neutral in the face of derision, for scornful laughter always conveys an arrogance of the heart, an announcement that the laugher thinks he or she stands much higher than anyone else on the social scale. The scornful laughter plays the ultimate role – God. Derisive laughter clearly dominates. (1995.69)

Sanders notes how the ancients recognised that a single sardonic laugh can devastate even the most powerful human being, and left unchecked, sardonic laughter can tear the fabric of society into tiny shreds (1995.113). So we need to carefully consider what role and purpose the mocking derisive laughter of the Old Testament plays in the life and perception of the children of Israel, and its implications in developing a Christian theology of laughter. Sanders notes:

> Before the angry Jehovah, however, all of humankind, in Abraham's words, will find themselves reduced to "dirt and ashes" (Deut.4.24: "For the Lord thy God is a consuming fire"). When the Lord unleashed his vengeful fire … he decimated all of Sodom in a flash. … Act out in front of the Hebrew God and you are liable to find yourself a human inferno. The choice seems clear: humiliation or immolation. (1995.75)

I think in trying to understand this predominant mocking and derisive laughter, it is important to bear in mind the location and topography of Israel and Judah, in a comparatively fertile land "flowing with milk and honey" at the end of the great African Rift Valley. This was an important highway controlling one of the most important and profitable trade routes of the ancient world, not only from Africa via Egypt, but also in the Galilee 'The Way of the Sea' with its Decapolis cities, but also potentially with links to 'The Silk Road' extending from China and India through to the Mediterranean Sea.

For these various reasons, it attracted the attentions of neighbouring tribes and their nearby powerful nations, who frequently sought to invade or control Israel and Judah. Historically, the Old Testament depicts the nation state as almost always under threat from one or more powerful neighbouring tribes and super-powers, detailing clashes successively with the Philistines, Moabites, Ammonites, Amalakites, etc., all of which are soon overshadowed by successive threats of invasion and vassal domination from

the Egyptians, Babylon and Persia, followed by the Greeks under Alexander the Great, and religious suppression under a successor, Antiochus Epiphanes. The comparatively brief recovery of sovereignty following the successful Maccabean revolt came to an end with conquest by Rome, the situation which pertained in the New Testament period. A further factor to be borne in mind, and relating to the conquest of the land under Joshua after the Exodus experience, is when Sanders points out how Hvidberg and many other Old Testament scholars suggest Yahweh did not originally express a characteristic of divine displeasure, but that this attitude was quite deliberately assigned to him in Canaan: 'because they needed to keep their desert God uncontaminated by the fertile vegetation deity whose commanding presence they found in that new land' (1995.53).

For much of this time the people of Israel became the oppressed, which may possibly have occasioned the biblical writers to take a superior view of themselves and their covenant relationship with Yahweh, whom they expect to defend and preserve them, perhaps reflected in taking a mocking and derisive “us” versus “them” line of laughter with regard to their enemies. Jacqueline Bussie's work (2007) provides further insights into the situations provoking the laughter of the oppressed, and their causes and expression (detailed in chapter six) which may go some way to explaining the scornful, mocking, and derisive laughter found in the Old Testament writings. They are also indicative of the prevailing laughter in other societies and cultures in the ancient world during that early period, particularly mirroring that of Ancient Greece. Sanders notes: 'The Hebrew word … for laughter, *sachaq*, denotes the Israelites' superiority over their former opponents' (1995.48).

Whilst we can never be certain regarding the precise and prevailing socio-cultural situation in which the biblical writers were operating, our task has inevitably to a large extent been one of reconstruction when it comes to the meaning and purpose of the mocking and derisive laughter of the Old Testament, which was not infrequently malicious in intent. My own proposal here is that by putting such derisive laughter into the mouth of God, as seen in some of the psalms (envisaged in entirely anthropomorphic terms), it gave both justification and licence for the use of such laughter against all who were perceived as a threat or enemy to the children of Israel, in just such an “us” and “them” scenario. Accordingly I believe it regularises and helps to explain some of the mocking and scornful laughter employed by prophets such as Elijah against the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, and the derision he heaps upon their god and his total absence there. In discussing my thoughts on this issue with Paul Joyce, Professor of Old Testament/Hebrew Bible at Kings College London, he

considered that my approach here, linked with Bussie's work on 'the laughter of the oppressed', may provide a useful key into better understanding the employment of such mocking and derisive laughter within the relevant texts.

As we find in some of the Psalms, there is a motif of God's laughter at the wicked to be discerned, a violent laughter of annihilation, as is in Wisdom 4.17-19, where the writer assures us “the Lord will laugh them to scorn”, and “the memory of them will perish”. But this is two-edged, as this can apply equally to God's reaction to the 'pride' of Israel, as to the 'pride' of the nations who threaten them (Psalm 2). We find when Israel becomes proud, it upsets the terms of the covenant, of the suzerain vassal treaty first established with Abraham, and successively with Isaac and eventually Moses. This set certain terms and conditions which following generations frequently failed to meet, hence eventually seen as the cause of the ultimate disaster, Israel's fall and exile into Babylon after the conquest of Nebuchadnezzar. From the eventual defeat of the Assyrians by the armies of Cyrus, King of Persia, which led to the return of Israel from exile, and eventual rebuilding of both walls and Temple in Jerusalem, we find in the passages from Isaiah chapter 40 on, comes the promise of comfort and restoration. This involves a transformative expansion of Israel's theology and understanding about God himself, seen now not merely as their tribal God, but as the transcendent God of all of creation, the focus of all sovereignty and authority, one who not only punishes but shows mercy and compassion, one who has: 'measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span', before whom: 'the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales' (Isaiah 40.12a,15). Such a God is fully entitled to be in all senses superior, but are mockery and derision appropriate for such a God? This section seeks to examine the evidence for such laughter.

Laughter and Death in 1 and 2 Kings

1 Kings 18

We find the type of mocking laughter found here (and as seen in the Psalms) turned against the priests of Baal in the contest set up by Elijah on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18), where Jerome T. Walsh in his commentary in the *NJBC* sees the pivotal issue in vv. 21-40 to be the question of the religious loyalty of the people of Israel, whom Elijah is trying to draw away from Baal towards Yahweh (10.31, p.171). Elijah the prophet jeers at their feeble efforts to bring down fire upon their sacrificial bullock, and mocked them, saying Baal must be either musing, have gone aside (to the toilet), be on a journey, or was asleep and must therefore be awakened. Of course, their endeavours

ended in failure, whereas Elijah's water-drenched bullock was consumed with fire from heaven.

John Grey in his Commentary (1964) sees the self-laceration of the priests of Baal to be a rite of imitative magic, possibly as a substitute for human sacrifice, in which blood is the vital essence (1964.352). G.H. Jones in his Commentary on 1 and 2 Kings (1984) believes it was designed to draw the deity's attention and to recommend themselves to him (1984.320). He notes how Elijah accepts every handicap, and gives the opposition first choice over the sacrificial bulls (1984.319). Michael Screech comments:

> The laughter of the good, like the laughter of the evil, can end in death. Elijah's God won. We then learn how the laughter of a great prophet, like the laughter of the evil boys, can end in slaughter [see following on 2Kings 2]. This time the slaughter was good. The people turned against the priestly prophets of Baal, and Elijah urged them on. (1997.38)

To our present-day sensibilities, this slaughter of the prophets of Baal must seem at best regrettable, if not appalling genocide. But in the context of the time such slaughter was to be expected, and as far as the Old Testament writers were concerned vindicated both the prophet and Yahweh, returning the people to the worship of the true God of Israel, and away from the false gods introduced through Ahab and Jezebel (see I Kings 16.29-34, with this final verse alluding to child sacrifice). In summary, the contest finds Elijah using the derisive, mocking, and superior laughter of God found in the Psalms. Whilst God himself is not recorded here as laughing, the laughter of his prophet is certainly vindicated by the consuming fire and holocaust, leading to the people turning on the priests of Baal to slaughter them mercilessly. Again Yahweh prevails against the pagan deity. As Screech notes, the passage of this incident became a proof-text justifying harsh laughter of all sorts, not without analogies with the mockery directed at the flogged and crucified Christ, that harsh, railing satire which combines disparagement and ridicule, and is technically called *diasyrm* … a term that implies "tearing a man apart" (1997.38, 40), and the very opposite of laughter as a 'word against death', being words resulting in death.

2 Kings

We now turn now to an episode in 2 Kings 2.23-25 concerning the prophet Elisha at the outset of his prophetic career in succession to Elijah, after the latter was taken up by a whirlwind into heaven (2 Kings 2.11). Elisha, having torn and replaced his own clothes with the mantle of Elijah, and having made the bitter waters of Jericho sweet and wholesome, sets off for Bethel, and is promptly jeered at by small boys who call

him ‘baldhead’. Such insolent behaviour occasions Elisha to curse them in the name of the Lord, whereupon two she-bears emerge from the woods and promptly tear forty-two of the boys asunder. Again this apparent senseless loss of life seems to our modern sensibilities tragic, but to the writers would have perhaps been seen as their just rewards for abusing the prophet, and ultimately God, in such a manner.

G.H. Jones in his Commentary (1984) from the *New Century Bible Series* considers the description ‘baldhead’ may not refer to natural baldness (not usually visible, since by custom the head would be covered), but denote the custom prevalent among the prophets of being marked out with a tonsure (1984.390), a view supported by John Grey in his SCM *Old Testament Library* Commentary (1964), who considers the tonsure as a mark of the separation of the prophet from the profane sphere of life to the service of God. He considers the supposition that Elisha invoked Yahweh’s name to curse the boys with such terrible consequences, to be derogatory to such a great public figure such as Elisha, and as such bordering on blasphemy (1964.429). Begg in *NJBC* does not specifically refer to this incident, other than to comment: ‘the narrator is solely concerned with inculcating reverence toward a man of God’ (10. 43, p.175). Nevertheless for the boys concerned, a very hard lesson indeed. Gilhus cautions us:

> Generally in the Old Testament, laughter had lost its playful connotations. Even small children were not spared; short work was made of the children that laughed at or mocked the prophet Elisha, for instance. The cruel punishment reflected the gravity of the crime and showed that it did not pay to mock the God of Israel (2 Kings 2.23-4). Yahweh's superiority must not be challenged. (1997.25)

Screech comments: 'That example of the quick punishment of mocking laughter was a famous one ... [and is] one of the very few episodes of the Old Testament to give guidance on matters of laughter', adding:'the mocking laughter even of children may merit punishment at its most extreme', and that: 'laughing at God or his prophets is no trivial matter' (1997.33, 34). Screech suggests: ‘By the slaughter which came out of it, God intended to fix irrevocably in men's minds the respect due to elders and to his ministers, who are in *loco parentis*. They must not be laughed at’ (1997.35). Screech also sees this incident as prefiguring the subsequent mocking of Christ at Calvary, commenting that: 'Jesus, stripped and mocked, was made, as it were, bald for our sakes. And as baldy he was laughed at' (1997.36).

Gilhus with her particular insights into the bodily role involved in laughter, thinks whilst Yahweh's fierce laughter was a disembodied force, on occasion, in some of the Psalms, it can be seen to have had bodily connotations as well. Divine laughter was

perceived as a destructive force, more derisive than that of any other god, considering it: 'more scorn and ridicule, not merriment and joy – a mocking laughter – a derisive laughter of male power' (1997.22). This is contrasted with the very different laughter of regeneration evidenced in other cults and religions in both Mesopotamia and Egypt, as when comparing Yahweh with the contemporary and corresponding Mesopotamian god Anu, Gilhus comments:

> Anu's laughter put Adapa in his place and restored the cosmological balance which had been temporarily disturbed. Yahweh's laughter crushed and destroyed those who opposed him. This difference may be due in part to the fact that the historical context of Yahweh's divine laughter was different from that of the gods in Mesopotamia and Egypt. The fight of Yahweh's prophets on behalf of their god as well as for their own theological supremacy forms a background for Yahweh's laughter. (1997.26)

In summary, in this episode we saw the fate of the jeering small boys who called Elisha ‘baldhead’ or ‘baldy’. Theirs is laughter of mockery and derision, but not of superiority. Once again, no use of laughter as a ‘word against death’. There are clearly issues here in 1 and 2 Kings which modern ethicists may consider less than worthy in that the portrayal of ‘justifiable’ laughter and slaughter may ‘catch in the throat’, but the point of the stories surely lies in a theology of laughter based upon the Old Testament.

The Book of Psalms

Turning now to the category of the God who laughs at the rulers and the wicked, we find this comes especially into play in some of the Psalms, which are not always reflecting joy and happiness, but in some instances have a more sinister and threatening nature in the type of laughter apparent. John S. Kselman and Michael L. Barre in their commentary in the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* note the editorial division of the Psalter into five “books”, finding a parallel imitating the five-part “Torah” of the Pentateuch (1989.34.3, p.523).

Psalm 1 is a poem from the wisdom tradition which portrays and describes the two ways and states of mankind, describing the joy of the righteous in the study of the Torah (something developed in Psalm 119), and contrasting between the blessed (vv. 1-3) and the wicked (vv. 4-6). In their *Commentary on Psalms 1-50*, J.W. Rogerson and J. W. McKay (1977) note how in vv. 4-6 God responds in derision and judgement, with the godless seen as like chaff, as lightweight, worthless, without substance, and therefore lifeless. In laughing them to scorn, there is no personal vindictiveness, but rather the displaying of the sovereign contempt which their ridiculous plots merit. For the authors, the wicked, sinners, and the scornful are respectively seen as the enemies

of God, and they note how the parallelism suggests the terms are used as synonyms. Either way, ‘the way of the wicked will perish’. J. S. Kselman in the *NJBC* sees Psalm 1 as a wisdom psalm serving as a preface to the Psalter (34.20, p.527). For Kuschel, however:

> *The identification of mockery and sin* is already made here; it was to have devastating consequences in the history of Christianity also, as if there could be no legitimate mockery in the interest of faith, as if the person who mocked was automatically alien to God. (1994.56)

In Psalm 2 (seen by Kselman as a royal psalm placed at the beginning of the Psalter to announce the messianic theme), we find the kings of the earth and rulers conspiring and plotting against the Lord and his anointed, Israel's Davidic King. However, Israel is assured here: 'He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord has them in derision'. This is threatening laughter on God's part, for it promises: 'then will he speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury', continuing 'O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth' (Coverdale version). Here is clearly laughter of superiority, mocking the attempts of those who would go against God's will and purpose regarding Zion and his chosen people Israel. Anderson also sees this as a royal psalm, in which man proposes, but God disposes, noting in vv. 4-6 where God laughs and holds his people’s enemies in derision, this anthropomorphic description expresses the belief the Almighty is able to share in human feelings, and that the hostile efforts of God’s enemies are simply laughable. Here I would note the laughter is clearly derisive, and altogether different from the shared laughter with Abraham and Sarah, or the more gentle mockery apparent in the story of Jacob and Laban. Anderson notes Sigmund Mowinckel’s suggestion that v.7 is: ‘the king’s first proclamation to his subjects’ (1962, Pt.1.64). Kuschel notes:

> The most visible expression of this unassailable power of God is his laughter, a laughter of superiority and sovereignty, a knowing, mocking laughter from God who sees through the situation on earth and can therefore laugh mockingly at the vanity of human lust for domination. (1994.54)

Kuschel thinks in the psalms we have a radical change of perspective, where the talk is no longer of human beings who laugh at God, nor of a God who laughs happily with human beings, but of a God who laughs at people and nations and gets angry with them, noting: ‘With his laughter God's mocking doubt on all human attempts to impose their domination against his will is revealed’ (1994.55). In other psalms, too, we also find God laughing at the wicked, and at those who would despise his law and/or mock his commandments; indeed, encompassing all who would sin against his will. Kuschel

notes: 'The psalms of Israel in particular are full of massive polemic against such “wicked” people, against the godless of every kind' (1994.55). Yet other psalms portray God as one who himself laughs at the wicked and mockers, using mocking language and laughter against them. By way of example, Psalm 37 tells us: 'the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he sees that his day is coming [when] … their sword shall enter their own heart, and their bows shall be broken'.

In Psalm 59 (which both Kselman and Anderson regard as an individual [and probably royal] lament), the psalmist laments his plight and the threat his enemies pose to his life. However, he trusts that in God’s impregnable defences those enemies’ schemes will be in vain, and verses 8-10 express this confidence when God is reminded to refuse his grace to the godless and wicked: 'But you, Lord, laugh at them; you hold all the nations in derision'. Anderson comments: ‘When the godless are arrogant and blasphemous, it is natural for the Psalms to assert that it is God who will have the laugh at the wicked’, and because God is the protector of his people, he must also provide protection for the individual. Kselman notes: ‘Unless Yahweh shows himself as the divine judge, punishing the wicked (in this case, the attacking foe), the people may well “forget” God’ (34.76, p.535). Kuschel notes:

> In these circles the laughing God is the one who laughs at the other, whose annihilation is the desired aim. There is no longer anything about the laughter of God which brings reconciliation and makes peace; rather, it sets apart and divides. It becomes a weapon in the fight of the party of the just against the party of the wicked. (1994.58)

This divine laughter of God is enigmatic and ambivalent, nothing to do with joyful, happy laughter, and, as Kuschel notes, are: 'worlds removed from the laughter which Homer attributed to his gods', which, unlike Yahweh's laughter found in the Psalms, was not aimed at the annihilation of the godless. However, no *Schadenfreude*, comic laughter or frivolity here, but, as Kuschel notes:

> The God of these psalm singers is the guarantor of good against evil, of the holy against the unholy. His laughter is the divisive laughter of a partisan God whom the pious would like best to see denying free grace to all the impious. (1994.58)

Kuschel considers there is no longer anything liberating about the laughter of the God which the singers of certain psalms conjure up, for it seems to him to have become coupled with mockery, extending even as far as sarcasm. Accordingly the image of God in the Hebrew Bible threatens to become ambiguous, where his uncanny nature can be emphasized by his: 'inscrutable, impenetrable, and enigmatic laugh' (1994.58,

59).

By way of contrast to the points which Kuschel makes, James Martin highlights how joy is to be found in many of the psalms, particularly the *praise psalms,* where there are frequent expressions of joy in response to God's goodness, and where such gratitude to God would naturally lead into joy (2011.43). But, joy is not the same as laughter; and whilst it may sometimes lead into laughter, this is not necessarily so. Laughter may indeed result in a sense of joy, but clearly they are not necessarily the same thing, as laughter may sometimes prove to be scornful and derisive in nature, but in such circumstances not necessarily joyful. Joy always carries a moral tone in that something *good* is the cause of that joy, whereas laughter is much more ambiguous morally, in that it may be both 'innocent' and happy', or it may be derisory and bullying.

Here in the Book of Psalms we find mostly the snarling vicious laughter as described earlier by Screech, a scornful, superior, mocking laughter of Yahweh in the face of Israel's enemies, and in the sinful laughter of the fool and the wicked, whose promised fate is death and destruction. Words here of promised death, not against death *per se*. Cote notes how, in the Old Testament, usually the only concession with regard to laughter was the acceptance of the laughter of derision (1986.22), with a tendency to laugh at rather than laugh with, and therefore to victimize those perceived as the enemies of God and of his people Israel, and as such a contemptuous reaction to the ways of the wicked on earth. Such divine laughter is meant to convey God's superiority, not his sense of humour (1986.23). But here I would note we do see laughter in the psalms being used as a protest – against other people, and against life and conditions of life, and this must also include death itself, reflecting the theme that comes more to the fore in Ecclesiastes, that life is vain.

Ecclesiastes

The Book of Ecclesiastes outlines the teaching of 'The Preacher' (Qoheleth is how the author describes himself, a term that remains a mystery, but seen by some tradition as Solomon) where he sees all human effort and experience as 'vanity' or 'meaninglessness', firmly believing that "All is vanity" (Eccles.1.3). In the opening chapter, he takes stock of the world as he has experienced it, and perceives the cycle of life as apparently meaningless, and also notes the vanity of pleasure and wealth, when both fool and the wise must die, in futility leaving the fruit of their toil to undeserving heirs. His faith teaches him God has ordered all things according to his own purposes, which are ultimately unknowable. The godly must therefore be content with their lot, including their own limitations, and with what God gives them: "For to the man who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he

gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind" (Eccles.2.26).

But Qoheleth is not entirely negative, for he commends eating, drinking, and enjoyment, even in his daily toil in the common things in life, where humour, frivolity, and laughter are seen as entirely appropriate. Eccles 2.24 covers this ground, as does Eccles 3.12-13: "I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live, also that it is God's gift to man that every one should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil". Eccles. 5.18, Eccles 8.15, and Eccles 9.7 repeat similar sentiments and encouragement for enjoyment and laughter in the daily round of life and existence. But in Eccles. 2.2 he questions the role of laughter, saying: "It is mad", and of pleasure: "What use is it?", and in Eccles 3.4 acknowledges that there is: "a time to weep, and a time to laugh". In Eccles 7.3-6 he considers that: "Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad", and: "the laughter of fools" is also vanity.

Addison G. Wright in his commentary in *NJBC* sees this book as the work of an unknown Jewish sage of the post-exilic period, and its author, Qoheleth, represents the sceptical side of Israelite wisdom, challenging some of its cherished beliefs. He believes in God, and in the fear of God (3.14, 5.6) in an ethical code and in God's judgement on human behavior (11.9), but points out wisdom has its limitations, and never recommends folly (31.5, p.490). R.N.Whybray in his commentary on Ecclesiastes in the *New Century Bible* series (1989) believes the basic message of Qoheleth is that man does not know his time. In an article (*JSOT* July 1982) he sees Qoheleth as the: 'Preacher of Joy'. In the epilogue (12. 9-14), the preacher frequently insists on man's ignorance, in that he knows there is not one who does not sin, but also that the relationship between human behaviour and divine justice is hidden from human knowledge (1989.174). However, nothing is hidden from God, who will eventually and inevitably pronounce his judgment.

Daniel C. Fredericks (*JSOT* December 1991) surmises the book's message to be: 'enjoy life now while you can, and such enjoyment should not avoid wise labour'. The Preacher perceives that all that people strive for and think important in both life and society is ultimately vain and futile, and therefore can be seen as laughable. By extension, this must also be considered laughable vanity in God's sight, inviting the laughter of ridicule and derision of the type which seems to run throughout the Old Testament writings, especially in the Psalms. But the Preacher thinks contentment and enjoyment and acceptance of our God-given life and situation is important, so that it is not life itself which is vanity in God's sight, but those ultimately unimportant things

people strive after which God might mock. But I think in this biblical book, some humour can be detected which seems rather more subtle than the laughter of ridicule and derision would indicate, and therefore I believe there is some scope here towards developing a theology of laughter, but not necessarily in extending its use as a ‘word against death’.

Kuschel considers the phenomenon of laughter in the Old (First) Testament is not so much of a devaluation or even disparagement of laughter as may be thought; however, in some of the later books of the Old Testament canon, the so-called Wisdom literature of Ecclesiastes, Sirach, Proverbs, and Wisdom, we come to find a more explicit denunciation of human laughter and its 'worthlessness' (1994.62, 63). In this case, it is often the fool, with his frivolity and lack of thought, who is compared and contrasted unfavourably with the idealised picture of the wise man, such as is found in Sirach 27.12f, where we are told: “The talk of fools is offensive, and their laughter is wantonly sinful”.

In summary, in Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth finds ultimately all is: ‘vanity and a striving after wind’, and that all the endeavours and all that humankind seeks to obtain, hold, or possess, are in God’s sight worthless and laughable. On this basis, all material things people strive after, can, by extension, be viewed by God with some scorn, ridicule, and derision. But Qoheleth exhortss his readers to be content with their lot, and to find joy and happiness in the ordinary things of life, in situations where laughter would be entirely appropriate. A pertinent thought comes from Eccles. 10.19: “Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything”!

In conclusion, I would briefly note that, as we found in some of the Psalms, there is a similar motif of God's laughter at the wicked to be discerned, a violent laughter of annihilation, as is in Wisdom 4.17-19, where the writer assures us: “the Lord will laugh them to scorn”, and that: “the memory of them will perish”. Again, not the most helpful basis upon which to develop a theology of laughter, or to find any ‘words against death’.

My assessment has been primarily concerned with humour and laughter rather than comedy and the comic and comedic; however, Melissa Jackson’s work (2012) has sought to bring a comic reading to bear on certain texts within the Hebrew Bible in conversation with feminist-critical interpretation, by examining the narratives of a number of biblical characters for evidence of these comic elements. She notes how Biblical Hebrew is not devoid of words which relate to humour (2012.31). The characters she examines include the trickster matriarchs, the women involved in the infancy of Moses, Rahab, Deborah and Jael, three of David’s wives (Michal, Abigail,

Bathsheba), Jezebel, Ruth, and Esther. Her work may therefore provide other broader inter-related areas for further research in associated fields beyond my specific brief, but is nonetheless worth noting. Further consideration of her work is to be found in chapter five. In summary, Jackson suggests:

> Each of the three 'theories of laughter' is a part of the Hebrew Bible story: comedy of superiority follows naturally from Israel's self‐understanding as God's chosen people over all other people; the pressure of life lived under the rule of another people is relieved in the laughter of Esther, and every underdog who wins the day - women repeatedly besting men, outsiders brought inside - is another instance of comic incongruity. The story of Delilah and Samson brought together with the concluding episode in Samson's narrative arc is one demonstration of comedy's relationship to tragedy. (2012.38)

Having reviewed the type of comedy Jackson has discerned in the Hebrew Bible, such humour and laughter was more akin to the mocking, derisive, and superior laughter evident in some of the psalms, and of more limited value in helping develop a Christian theology of laughter. In summarizing his analysis, Kuschel concludes in the Old (First) Testament we have a wide palette of ambiguous laughter, both of human laughter and of God's laughter, as follows:-

For human beings:

- There is the sceptical unbelieving laughter of men and women at God, which can change into a liberating, joyful laughter with God.
- There is the unconcerned, indeed sinful laughter of the fool, which will be silenced, since the seriousness of the wise is contrasted with the laughing fool.

As far as God is concerned:

- There is the joyful, liberating laughter of God with the doubters and sceptics.
- There is the superior, mocking laughter of God who demonstrates the limits of the non-Israelite rulers and all wicked men and sinners, and in this way divides and sets a limit.
- There is the uncanny, enigmatic, inscrutable laughter of God at innocent people which is destructive of trust in its manifest arbitrariness. (1994.64)

Summary of findings with regard to the Old Testament, and their implications for

this thesis

Cote notes whilst the Canaanite gods and goddesses laughed and made merry, for the most part: ‘Yahweh was portrayed as more forbidding, devoid of any trace of gaiety and geniality (1986.22). In trying to discern any consistent pattern for laughter in the Old Testament, derisive and scornful laughter in the Psalms seems to me to be the most consistent theme. This was clearly potentially unhelpful in forming a distinctive Christian theology of laughter from both Cote and Kuschel's fundamentally positive viewpoint, since there would seem no consistent positive constructive Old Testament ‘theology of laughter’, other than a negative one which focuses on superiority, mockery and derision. Kuschel clearly believes we need to question carefully what spirit can be discerned in the type of laughter that occurs in the text, for he describes the laughter of God found in the Old Testament as ambiguous at best (1994.75).

Kuschel’s clearly objects to malicious laughter, mocking laughter, and laughter at the defenceless and the marginalized in society, and at cynical laughter, all of which he sees as potentially laughter without ethics (1994.xx, xxi). All these distinctive features can be traced in the examples of ambiguous laughter found in the Old Testament (with its not infrequent underlying philosophy of ‘an eye for an eye’ and ‘a tooth for a tooth’, and an ‘us’ and ‘them’ philosophy, noted by Jackson). It seems to me we must therefore acknowledge this may well reflect the perceptions of the various biblical writers, rather than providing us with an accurate reflection of the God whose ‘word’ they seek to record, and whose laughter for the most part therefore remains hidden.

I have highlighted some books and episodes which, in my opinion, paint a more positive portrait of Yahweh and his relationship with his chosen people Israel, but found little evidence for the use of laughter as a ‘word against death’, other than to note those aspects which seem to me to be primarily negative, such as the predominant use of the scornful and derisive laughter already noted, but which must have an instructive role and purpose within the overall text. However, as outlined above, I believe the concept of ‘the laughter of the oppressed’ proposed by Jacqueline Bussie (examined in chapters six and seven) does much to help explain and justify its potential use within an overall Christian theology of laughter. Whilst Cote believes: ‘it would be difficult to read the Bible and miss the implicit evidence of Yahweh’s sense of humour’ (1986.49), in the Old Testament alone, I suggest this is at best a claim rather difficult to sustain.

As has been demonstrated, the Hebrew Bible contains examples of laughter and humour, albeit mostly of a mocking and scornful nature, and it is precisely these

scriptures which form and inform the roots of present-day Judaism, and the renowned Jewish tradition for humour as it has developed over many centuries. James Martin spoke to Daniel Polish, a rabbi in the Reform Jewish tradition, author of *Bringing the Psalms to Life*, who thought: 'anyone writing around the time of Jesus would have found plenty of humorous material in the Old Testament as well as in the Mishnah and the Talmud, noting: “There are parts of the Hebrew Scriptures that are intentionally funny” (2011.32). Clearly the subtleties of the Hebrew language, together with present-day Jewish understanding of these scriptures (refined over many centuries by the input from innumerable Jewish religious teachers and scholars in this important supplementary commentary material), have also not been part of my particular brief here. However, I believe they might provide ample scope for further research in this area by other scholars in the future. For a more informed source to help develop such a Christian theology of laughter, we now look at the New Testament writings, and the life and teachings of Jesus, primarily as recorded by the Gospel writers.

CHAPTER THREE: LAUGHTER IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AND GNOSTIC TEXTS

Whilst the historical Jesus as portrayed in the Gospel accounts is never reported as having laughed, yet we can find in them inferences that Jesus joked, made remarks that were 'witty', and that indeed he had a sense of irony and subtle humour. Whilst the Gospels may initially appear to be silent on the matter of Jesus' humour and laughter, I would argue his humour and laughter may nonetheless be inferred or discerned on closer examination of the texts.

James Martin in *Between Heaven and Mirth* (2011) points out when the Gospel accounts were written and came to be used by the Church, this took place mainly in the Hellenistic world of Greek culture, which was the dominant influence of the Eastern Mediterranean region in Jesus' time. They were compiled by the Gospel writers with the intention of telling the story of Jesus as clearly as possible and in such a way as to appeal to the people of their time and culture, but perhaps they were aiming at more than 'story'. The didacticists behind the Gospels looked for a testimony of eternal signification. Perhaps with Christianity increasingly detached from its roots in Judaism and Temple worship in which Jesus had lived out his earthly life and ministry, and

thanks to the missionary journeys and preaching of Paul and many others in that wider gentile culture, the emergent Church was now beginning to spread to the furthermost corners of the Roman Empire, and to be composed primarily of gentile converts.

The Gospels were written in Greek, the everyday language of the region, in which it might seem more natural to portray Jesus as a 'wisdom teacher', a phenomenon with which these new converts would have been familiar, rather than as an overtly humorous person from an unfamiliar Jewish background and culture. Such an image of Jesus as a ‘wisdom teacher’ would certainly have been familiar to those groups we now describe as ‘Gnostic’. Martin speculates that perhaps Jesus' natural humour was downplayed, with an emphasis on seriousness rather than levity (2011.34). But even if the Gospels had been heavily judaistic, would this have remained any different?

Another reason for the apparent downplaying of humour in the New Testament may lie in the enormous emphasis placed on the Passion narrative in the four Gospel accounts, with a concentration on the last few weeks of Jesus' life leading up to his Crucifixion, which emphasizes his sufferings and death on the Cross. Martin feels the trauma of this event may have come to dominate the overall story of Jesus, and overshadow the many occasions in Jesus' life and ministry which must surely have been occasions for joy (2011.45-7). It begs the question as to whether this was done to advance a doctrine of vicarious atonement which no other religion could contradict or even surpass, for such a belief gives to Christianity an eternal status. In summary Martin (2011.50) suggests humour might have been given short shrift in Christian circles as follows:-

- A contemporary lack of understanding of what was considered funny in biblical times.
- The presiding norms of the Greco-Roman culture into which the Gospels were introduced.
- An over-familiarity with the stories in the Old and New Testaments.
- An overemphasis on the Passion in the Christian narrative.
- A failure of the imagination.
- The sociology of hierarchical institutions.

The significance for us in developing a Christian theology of laughter depends upon the answer of faith given by Peter to the question that Jesus put to his disciples at Caesarea Philippi presented in Matthew 16.13-20, namely “Who do men say that the Son of man is?” Peter understands that Jesus is not just another rabbi or teacher or

prophet, but affirms “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”. Here is John’s belief expressed that Jesus is “the Word made flesh” of John Chapter 1, a central belief to Christian faith and witness; the one whom the author of 1 John 1.1 testifies “We have heard him, we have seen him with our own eyes, we have looked upon him, and our hands have touched him”. If Jesus, a fully human being acknowledged as having been born of Mary his mother, is indeed “the Son of the living God”, then in him God’s full character is seen in human form, and the anthropomophism evidenced in the Old Testament writings is not only justified, but is actually exemplified in the life of Jesus of Nazareth as ‘the Christ of God’. Richard Cote (1986) notes:

> In the New Testament it is justified by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Indeed the mystery of the Incarnation is the supreme justification of anthropomorphism. All else is but a prelude to the events of the incarnate Word, who now takes on human flesh (Philippians 2.7). He who previously had been described only in human terms now becomes human, “like us in all things but sin” (1986.45). The fact that God's “face” is now a real human face, his “word” a truly audible word, and his “heart” a real beating heart, makes every human expression of God a meaningful “sacrament”. (1986.45)

Here Cote seems to think that “God the Son” (the second Person of the Trinity) abandoned his divine form in order to be the human suffering sevant Jesus of Nazareth. But is this theologically right? It might/should be argued that “God the Son” took on the form of a servant without stopping being the second Person of the Trinity, i.e., preserving his divine form as well.

Cote Elton Trueblood (1964) analyses why people might fail to see the inherent humour in the New Testament, why the Church might have downplayed humour, and thinks the stories become stale and over-familiar by frequent repetition and by knowledge of the punch-line, suggesting perhaps the comedic “hook” Jesus was using was no longer needed, and therefore deemed irrelevant (2011.36). Additionally, Jesus’ humour may have been lost sight of in translation, together with any subtle wit, since Jesus mainly spoke in Aramaic (still spoken in parts of Syria), whereas the New Testament writings were written in Greek, presumably for Greek-speaking Christians and potential converts beyond the confines of the Holy Land, and which by this stage was more focused to appeal to the wider Roman world. For Trueblood:

> The deepest conviction of all Christian theology is the affirmation that the God

> of all the world is like Jesus Christ. Because the logical development is from the relatively known to the relatively unknown, the procedure is not from God to Christ, but from Christ to God. (1964.32)

We therefore need to look beneath the surface of the visible text of the four Gospel accounts, as well as consider the conclusions which other scholars have drawn through two thousand years of Christian history and experience, especially following on from the work of the scholars of the Renaissance and Reformation era, where greater knowledge and understanding, and availability of earlier texts contributed to a more accurate translation from their original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Thus scholars such as Erasmus and Rabelais and their companions become important in our quest, and their work (considered in chapter four), together with that of more recent scholars, will be illuminating and instructive.

Whilst Cote believes that the majority of Christians have instinctively known that God has a sense of humour, even if there is little explicit evidence in the Bible to support such a claim, he also thinks divine blessings often come in the most ludicrous way, and in the fact Christians can continue to trust God despite so many negative trends and tragedies around them, although he offers no particular evidence for this, apart from expressing: 'this is a deep, quasi-instinctive knowledge of the things of God, a spontaneous wisdom given by the Holy Spirit, and that this applies to the commonly held belief that God has a sense of humour' (1986.50). He may have a valid point. He observes:

> The Church as an institution, as an organized religion, does not reflect this faith experience of its members. Church leaders, who set its rules and preside over its life, seem unaware of God's mirth – not opposed to it, not trying to undermine it, just invincibly ignorant of it. If we are to speak of church renewal – as we must – this is one area where it is long overdue. (1986.50)

Cote questions why God's mirth and laughter have not been celebrated and given more prominence in organized religion, especially in the Church's liturgical rites and pastoral approach, and why religion is so sombre when God appears to be so mirthful (1986.53). As I look for such implicit evidence that Yahweh, the God of Israel, has a sense of humour, the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth may hopefully reveal more clues or explicit evidence to enable us to recover and develop a Christian theology of laughter that may perhaps encourage the wider Church in its ongoing mission and witness. This chapter will initially look at the three so-called Synoptic

Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, then at John's Gospel (also known as the Fourth Gospel), before briefly considering the letters of St. Paul, and the so-called 'Gnostic' texts.

3.1 The Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke

Karl-Josef Kuschel notes: 'More than any other evangelist, Luke not only attaches supreme importance to the fact that with the appearance of Jesus a messianic age has dawned, but strikingly interprets this age as a time of joy' (1994.69) But with this joy, I believe we can also perceive that laughter might well be present, with laughter surely appropriate for that new Messianic Age.

Such potential laughter is initially indicated in Luke's account of the angelic appearance to Zacharias at the altar of incense in the Jerusalem Temple (Luke 1.5-23) when he is informed that his wife Elizabeth will bear a son (who is to be called John), promising: 'you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth' (Luke 1.14 RSV). Robert Karris in his commentary in *NJBC* thinks Luke has set the information into the pattern of an Old Testament annunciation of birth, given him by tradition, to be seen in the light of similar events in the Old Testament, such as we see with Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 16 and 18, already considered), and Elkanah and Hannah (1 Samuel 1-2), whose children Isaac and Samuel had key roles in salvation history as patriarch and prophet respectively (1989.679). Elizabeth herself at the Visitation of Mary exclaims: 'when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy' (Luke 1.44). However, whilst there is clearly joy and ecstatic rejoicing in the conversation when the two cousins meet, it is significant that Mary, unlike her forebear Sarah, is not recorded as laughing.

Karris suggests: 'The meaning of God's inauguration of Jesus of the final stage of salvation history is so rich theologically that Luke interprets it twice more, in 1.39-45 and 1.46-56' (1989.681). Both mothers-to-be praise the God active in their lives, with Elizabeth's child presented as the "precursor" of Mary's child, and with the unborn Baptist's leaping for joy seen as an appropriate response to God's fulfilment of promise in Jesus. Karris considers in Mary's Magnificat 'the theme of rejoicing in God's fulfilment of promise again bubbles forth' (1989.681), surely an occasion where laughter might not seem entirely inappropriate? And of course it is 'news of great joy' that is brought to the Bethlehem shepherds when Jesus is born, a joy to be communicated to the 'whole people' (Luke 2.10), now this messianic age has begun. Karris sees the angels' revelation of the meaning of Jesus as Luke presenting Jesus as

the Davidic Messiah who will bring about the eschatological gift of peace (1989.682). In looking at the New Testament Gospel accounts, particularly Matthew and Luke, Cote believes:

> With the dramatic events of the Incarnation we see the irresistible folly and humour of God. Here we are given, as never before, the assurance that it is alright to laugh. The Incarnation is a comedy of grace... that this world for all its ugliness and this body for all its frailties and this time for all its mad logic are precisely where God wants to be. … This comic grace is carried through into the life and teaching of Jesus. (1986.52)

This suggestion that the Incarnation is a comedy of grace is interesting. Here is the God who inspires Mary at her Visitation to Elizabeth to pronounce words we now know as the Magnificat (listed in some early manuscripts as emanating from Elizabeth), one who scatters the proud in the imagination of their hearts, who puts down the mighty from their thrones, and exalts those of low degree, thoughts and words which will later inspire the concepts underlying liberation theology. Luke affirms God chooses his handmaiden of low estate to be the mother of his Son, an unmarried young virgin, who will miraculously conceive and bear that Son to share in our humanity that we might share in his divinity, a comedy of grace indeed.

Martin notes: 'Joy virtually leaps off the page in this story of the Visitation and in Mary's great Magnificat. Other Bible stories also reveal great joy, if we know where to look for it' (2011.140). Once again, joy is mentioned, but not explicitly laughter, even when Martin thinks it can be implied, but I am not entirely convinced by his supposition here. The Gospel story is clear God overturns all human expectations and conventions on their heads, as will Jesus in his life and ministry, and as something which now, as then, seems folly to the worldly and those who follow its ways, and therefore laughable, as, by extension, must be those who accept and believe it. But the Gospels affirm God has the last irresistible laugh. Those who find the Gospel message and the faith of Christians hard to accept would find it laughable, for to the worldly it makes no sense, and must therefore seem folly.

Kuschel suggests: 'The warm current of messianic joy persists through Jesus' life as he begins to speak in public and to perform his signs', highlighting particularly (Luke 4.18f) the episode of his visit to the synagogue in Nazareth, where he reads from Isaiah (61.2f) proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour, which, through Jesus as the anointed one, has come about in their very hearing (1994.72). However, this is not a fulfilment

Jesus' kith and kin and former neighbours wish to hear, and far from occasioning laughter or joy and rejoicing at the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy, they seek to hustle him away in order to kill him, endeavouring to cast him headlong from the steep cliff upon which their town is built. The lakeside of Galilee would prove a more fertile place to look for signs of messianic joy and laughter, with Karris seeing this episode as a prime example of Luke's ordering of materials according to the theological principle of God's promise finding fulfillment in Jesus. Luke's programmatic account of Jesus' ministry, and his description of Jesus' inaugural preaching recorded in this Gospel, emphasize the continuity between the old and the new, whereby Jesus is seen to stand in the finest line of Israel's traditions (1989.689).

In Mark 5.35-40 we hear of Jairus' daughter and those who gathered to mourn her loss. When Jesus says: 'The child is not dead but sleeping', they mocked and laughed at him, for it sounded laughable to his hearers that he could possibly be able to awaken the dead to life. This laughter directed at Jesus is not only mocking, but scornful, and laughter of disbelief. The actions of Jesus will challenge their lack of faith and unbelief, both in Jesus himself, but by extension also in God. This laughter of unbelief is entirely negative in respect to the concept of 'words against death', whereas faith in God and in Jesus in this incident, together with the raising of the widow of Nain's son, and the raising of Lazarus at Bethany, do provide us with such 'words against death', because in each of these instances God can and does reverse death, enabling us to laugh at death with God, none more so in the light of the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Day. Harrington comments:

> The terms used in the expression of Jairus's hope ("be healed", "live") were the technical terms in early Christian circles for salvation and resurrected life, suggesting that early Christians may have taken the restoration of life of Jairus's daughter as a preview or anticipation of the resurrected life of Jesus and those who believe in him. (1989.608)

When news his daughter is dead is conveyed to Jairus, this: 'increases the mood of hopelessness and prepares for the girl's restoration to life'. Harrington expounds: 'the description of the commotion about the girl confirms that she had really died; it indicates a ritual of mourning', and that the mourners, "weeping and wailing loudly" *ridiculed him* (1989.608). Here is mocking laughter of unbelief aimed at Jesus, which Harrington considers will heighten the extraordinary character of what Jesus is about to do, and that the girl's subsequent action and the crowd's reaction of amazement confirm the reality of the miracle (1989.608). Similarly, we may note at Calvary when he

hung upon the cross at his crucifixion, Jesus was also mocked and laughed at by his detractors with the words: 'he saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God' (Luke 23.35). This is clearly a laughter of scorn and ridicule and unbelief, a laughter that anticipates his death, but which will be confounded in his Resurrection, the ultimate ‘word against death’.

In Mark 7.5 the Pharisees and Scribes ask Jesus why his disciples were not following the tradition of the elders by eating without first undertaking the ceremonial washing of hands, a controversy concerning ritual purity. Here Jesus criticizes them, and distinguishes between the original divine command, and the accumulation of human tradition which had developed in its wake, using the mocking laughter of sarcasm to accuse them of manipulating the rules when it suited their own purpose to do so. Harrington considers:

> The theological focus is the Old Testament law in relation to Jesus. He rejects the Pharisaic tradition surrounding the law’s observance, warns against substituting human teachings for divine commandments and using the law as a way to escape from one’s obligation, and abrogates the Old Testament food laws. The implicit christological claim is that Jesus is the authoritative interpreter of the Old Testament law. (1989.611)

Then following on in Mark 7.11-13, Jesus cites their practice of using Corban (or *korban*) to avoid parental duty encapsulated by the fifth Commandment, thereby making void the word of God through this later tradition they are handing on. In this way he attacks them by showing what they are doing is laughable (1964.82). Harrington comments: ‘What looks like pious behaviour is actually a way of circumventing religious obligation’ (to one’s parents) (1989.612). When later Jesus is accused of being possessed by Beelzebul in casting out demons, his strategy is one of laughter by turning on his critics to ask them by whom then do their own sons purport to cast them out. They cannot have it both ways.

Trueblood highlights the humorous dialogue between Jesus and a Canaanite woman whose daughter is possessed, and who turns to Jesus for help (found in Mark 7.24-30 and Matthew 15. 21-28). Here both Mark’s and Matthew's accounts concur in Jesus' remark: 'It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs'. Here she has a double disadvantage in being both a Gentile and a woman, and having been first ignored, is now equated with a dog! But she comes straight back at Jesus, reminding him even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table. Harrington believes the real focus of the story is this dialogue between Jesus and the Gentile

woman, and that her witty reply builds on Jesus' pronouncement by turning it to her advantage (in much the same way Jesus uses in the parables, and in answering his own critics). Benedict Viviano commenting on the Matthew account notes: 'the woman is quick to pick up on the imagery of Jesus' reply and twist it to her advantage, yet without arrogance' (1989.659). Her criticism of such exclusivity shows how there can be a place for non-Jews in God's plan, for Harrington (on Mark's version) notes: 'Without denying the salvation-historical precedence of Israel and the focus of Jesus' ministry, she rejects the idea of exclusivity for Jesus' power' (1989.612), with Jesus taking her reply as a sign of faith in God's plan and in his power. Viviano believes for Mark's Gentile-Christian readers this explains the presence of such people in the early Church amongst the people of God (1989.612).

Trueblood considers her sharp and witty reply to this apparent insult as the best part of the confrontation, and feels it is impossible to miss the humour in the response. She wins the argument and Jesus recognises the faith she has in him, and sends her away with the assurance her daughter is no longer possessed. He has tested her mettle and seen the wit of her reply in the banter between them, and his response is immediate, affirmative, and friendly. Trueblood says: 'Thus one of the best evidences of Christ's wit is the way in which He responded to the wit of another', ... and: 'As in so many other instances of Christ's humour, they shed light on His character which otherwise we miss entirely' (1964.124 , 125).

In assessing evidence for laughter, in Mark 3 we find Jesus being seen or described as a madman (and as such liable to be laughed at), and in the case of Jairus' daughter in Mark 5 the mourners mocked and laughed at him, with both episodes more akin to the derisive and superior laughter of the Old Testament. However, in Mark 7 it is Jesus who gently uses the rather gentler mocking laughter of sarcasm against the scribes and Pharisees for manipulating the rules to suit their own purposes, or to circumvent their obligations under the Mosaic law, a laughter not intended to wound or destroy, but to correct and to challenge. Only in this dialogue with the Canaanite woman do we see gentle wit and humour being brought to bear, something which becomes more apparent in the parables, but not evidence of obvious laughter as such.

3.2 Laughter implicit in the Parables

The three Synoptic Gospels indicate the use of parables was the primary means Jesus employed to present his teachings. Trueblood describes a parable as a single story, in strict narrative form, with the entire story making the point which the storyteller aims to

tell. Harrington notes the Greek term signifies a comparison or analogy, but its Hebrew equivalent has a much wider range of meaning to include sayings, stories, and even riddles (1989.605). Whilst acknowledging Jesus used parables as teaching devices, he thinks in some cases their original meaning may have been lost in transmission in the early Church. He sees them as being interpreted at three different levels: Jesus; the early Church; and the Gospel (1989.605). C.H. Dodd in *The Parables of the Kingdom* (1961) defines parables as: ‘a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought’ (1961.5).

There has been a long-standing literary debate about the nature of the parables, whether they should be seen as allegories or as narratives. David P. Parris (*JSNT* September 2002) suggests by employing the hermeneutical function of mimesis, this would allow new possibilities of understanding, whereby the same parable could be read either as an allegory or as a narrative whole, and that a mimetic representation of the parable would allow for these classifications to be mutable (not fixed), and will shift depending upon the relationship between the reader and the text.

After Jesus tells the parable of the sower (also known as the parable of the seeds, or of the fourfold field), he has to unpack its meaning for his disciples privately afterwards (Mark 4.1-20). There is a sense of humour apparent in respect of those who fail to grasp the message, and Harrington believes this: ‘illustrates God’s lavish offer of the kingdom in Jesus’ preaching and the mixed response given to it, which the early Church could have used as an explanation for the mixed reception accorded to Jesus’ preaching and a source of encouragement in the face of opposition’. Harrington notes how the irony contained in Isaiah 6.9-10 is continued in Mark 4.12. (1989.604). Any laughter that might be perceived here in Jesus’ teaching is accordingly quite subtle. Joy is certainly indicated in the seed which fell on stony ground, and Jesus’ parallel teaching the meaning of the parable to the disciples relates to those whose initial enthusiasm for the ‘good news’ of the Gospel will ultimately prove superficial and not deep-rooted, who will not persevere when troubles come because of the word, and will fade away from their fellowship. Perhaps these people are to be considered laughable in their shallow fair-weather faith.

Amy-Jill Levine (2006) told Martin she believes the Church has often misunderstood the Jewish background of Jesus, arguing: 'Christian preachers often misrepresent Jesus's words and deeds, because they fail to understand the Jewish context in which he lived’ (2011.32). She said: ‘The parables were amusing in their exaggeration or

hyperbole. For example, the idea that a mustard seed would have sprouted into a big bush that birds would build their nests in would have been humorous' (2011.32). Martin notes:

> Parts of the parable, therefore, were not simply clever – but actually *funny* to a first-century audience. Indeed, the very incongruity of the parables – the topsy-turvy, seemingly absurd nature of their message (the poor are rich; the rich are poor; the blind see; the sighted are blind) - is the stuff of comedy. The absurdity is even richer when listeners realize that Jesus's insights are, in fact, true. But we often overlook that aspect of the Gospels. (2011.32)

In the parable of the Unjust Steward (also described as the shrewd manager) presented in Luke 16.1-13, Trueblood suggests that whilst it might not be the finest example of humour in the parables, it is the most ambitious example. The fact that: 'the master commended the dishonest steward for his prudence' seems to fly in the face of Jesus' teaching, for surely he is not advising total unscrupulousness. Whilst other scholars like Karris take a different view (1989.708), Trueblood's hypothesis is that *Jesus was joking*, and part of its point was the necessity to transcend prudence by making a statement so preposterous that the sensitive hearer would realise that its clear intent was the exact opposite of the literal statement, and thereby humorous and laughable. Ultimately, 'You cannot serve God and mammon'. Trueblood considers this is as uncompromising as can be, whereas the story of the parable is wholly compromising, and thereby makes the teaching more vivid.

The parable of the debtors (or unforgiving servant) in Matthew 18.23-35 is one example which is laughable with its gross inconsistency between the first servant who owed and was forgiven by his master an enormous debt, who then went on to refuse to forgive the comparatively miniscule and piffling amount owed to him by his fellow servant who entreated his mercy. Whilst clearly 'laughable' has a quite different meaning to laughter, laughable can provoke or occasion laughter when applied to apparent incongruity and inconsistency. Karris thinks this is a parable of the kingdom concerned with not abusing the divine patience and mercy, reminding people that divine patience is not infinite, but teaching its hearers of the need to imitate that divine mercy shown to the first debtor (1989.662). A similar point is made in the allied joke about the beholder with a beam in his own eye, who had the temerity to complain and then offer to help remove the speck in his neighbour's eye (Matthew 7.3-5 [which Viviano sees as a warning against hypocritical judges (1989.646)], and Luke 6.41

[which Karris sees as an admonition for those who see their lapses in the area of sharing possessions as being minute compared with the gross failures of others (1989.695)]). Christopher Evans in his *TPI* commentary on *Saint Luke* (1990) sees this as parabolic teaching in the form of questions and injunction, noting there is a terser, but probably secondary version in the Gospel of Thomas 26, where *speck* and *log* betray the element of the grotesque found elsewhere in the parabolic teaching of Jesus (1990.338). When Jesus tells them not to cast pearls before swine (Matthew 7.6) he was employing the patently absurd to make his point, made more preposterous by mentioning unclean animals their dietary laws forbade the Jews from eating. [Viviano believes in this context pearls could refer to the message of the kingdom, or to the sermon itself (1989.646)]. Either way, it seems there is no point wasting precious words, time or effort on those who are chronically impervious or habitually unresponsive (see also Trueblood 1964.49).

In common with a number of biblical scholars, Trueblood thinks a certain amount of embellishment has taken place with many of the parables, but that Luke provides us with the older text than that of Matthew, and is therefore likely to be closer to the original teaching. Sometimes the parables are doubled up to emphasise the same point, as with the case of the lost sheep and the lost coin, or the patched garment and the new and old wineskins. Rather than focusing upon the versions of this parable in Mark and Matthew, Trueblood considers only the final sentence in Luke's version has retained its sly humour, and is therefore the real punch-line of the story missing from the other two, indicating people are resistant to change, even when the old system and ways are clearly failing. In the case of the latter, Trueblood reads this as teaching that a system like that of the Pharisees is so inflexible it cannot contain the new fermenting wine of the spirit that is appearing in Jesus (1964.95). He considers the parable of the new wineskins to be perhaps the best *parabolic* example of Christ's humour (Trueblood's description), in this case 'sardonic' (1964.98).

Martin thinks Jesus probably knew he had to "grab" his listeners, and that his stories were often sharp and provocative, and, as an itinerant preacher, he would have needed to attract his listeners quickly through a funny story, a clever parable, or a humorous aside. He writes:

> The constant themes of his preaching – love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; forgive someone seventy times seven times; the kingdom of God is at hand – were so ridiculous, so incongruous, that they may at first have seemed humorous to listeners. His parables are the

> stuff of comedy – expectations are frustrated, the poor come out on top, and the rich are revealed as fools. (2011.52)

Martin quotes from Gerald Arbuckle (2008), who suggests:

> People would most likely have laughed at many of Jesus' intentionally ridiculous illustrations, for example, the idea that someone would have lit a lamp and put it under a basket, or that a person would have built a house on sand, or that a father would give a child stones instead of bread. (2011.33)

Martin thinks we may be missing much of the humour Jesus intended, and that his audience understood in his parables, noting how David J Harrington told him: ‘Humour is very culture-bound’, … and that: 'The Gospels have a lot of controversy stories and honour-shame situations. I suspect that the early readers found these stories hilarious, whereas we in a very different social setting miss the point entirely' (2011.33).

Here in the parables I believe we find sufficient evidence of Jesus’ gentle life-affirming humour demonstrated in abundance, earthly day-to-day stories with deeper (heavenly) meaning, teasing those with the imagination to work out the underlying teaching and intention they contain, some exaggerated, some highlighting inconsistency, but overall not aimed at evoking immediate outright laughter, but humorous nonetheless.

3.3 Clashes with Religious Authority Figures

Many of the disputes Jesus had with the Pharisees, as presented in the Gospels, demonstrate how he used humour and laughter against them when they criticised either him or his disciples, or tried to catch him out or entrap him in an endeavour to destroy him. Trueblood sees laughter as Christ's major weapon of defence, using it fully against them where they were most vulnerable – in their manifest self-righteousness, and their 'holier than thou' zealous application of the Law of Moses, and the many later accretions and developments of that law in the synagogues of his day. He writes:

> The very loyalty to the text of Scripture led, paradoxically, to scribal additions or expositions, since the Scripture required explanation. These explanations tended to achieve an authoritative status of their own. The obligatory expositions sometimes involved the most subtle casuistry, and this became an obvious target for Christ's ironical thrusts. (1964.76)

Trueblood indicates here how Jesus laughed away righteous pretence, employing the strategy of laughter towards all who supposed that by rules they could solve the problem of sin. He also notes how, when we are aware of inconsistencies, and when they are not too painful, we laugh. He finds the essence of Christ's strategy of using laughter against the Scribes and Pharisees encapsulated in Matthew 23, where Jesus acknowledges they sit on Moses' seat when it comes to interpreting the law and executing judgments to impose upon others, but they do not practise what they preach. Jesus tells his hearers to: 'practise and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do' (vv.2-3). The contrast between what they say and what they do themselves is therefore inherently humorous, especially in people with such high pretensions which Jesus highlights.

Viviano sees Matthew 23 as a hinge concluding the series of parables of judgment and controversies with the Jewish leaders, before introducing the last great discourse of Jesus in the following two chapters. He believes it is of historical interest because it helps us to see the background of the crucifixion, but may also show the Matthean community in polemic dialogue with the rival Jewish academy in Jamnia (1989.666). In verses 13-33, which Viviano sees as: 'a terrible section of seven woes corresponding to the Beatitudes', Matthew seeks to flatten out the opposition to Jesus, and that: 'ultimately here the Pharisees are accused of being false teachers because they do not accept the teaching mission of Jesus as the Christ'. Undergirding is the Matthean Jewish-Christian viewpoint that the whole Torah is to be observed, but as interpreted by Jesus (1989.666, 667). Frank J. Matera (*JSNT* July 1993, vol. 16, 51: pp.57-77) discusses Jesus' conflict with Israel during Luke's account of his journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9.51 to 19.46), examining these various discourses from a literary-critical perspective, disclosing the conflicting points of view espoused by Jesus when compared with that of the crowd and its religious leaders, and concluding this analysis helps to explain Jesus' final rejection at Jerusalem.

As religious leaders, their ostentation is open to ridicule in those who insist on the dignity of esteemed titles of address (vv.8-10), people who: 'make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long' (v.5), who expect the best seats in the synagogue and at table at feasts (v.6), and go about in long robes to receive the salutations of others in the marketplace (Mark 12.38-39). Amongst Jesus' humorous criticisms here is his example of the outward cleansing of a cup, whilst within its potential corruption remains uncleansed, and also similarly the concept of straining at a gnat, whilst inadvertently swallowing a camel. Jesus accuses them of a somewhat 'dog in the manger' attitude: 'because you shut the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither enter

yourselves, nor allow those who would enter to go in' (v.13). Trueblood reminds those who are today's religious leaders (of whatever faith or variety) that: 'presumption is not confined to synagogues' (1964.85). But subjects for humour and laughter abound here.

Trueblood highlights where Christ's strategy of laughter is employed elsewhere in the Gospels. When the Temple priests and elders demand to know by what authority he acts, in say the cleansing of the Temple, he turns it around and asks them about the authority and validity of John the Baptist and his ministry. This places them in a dilemma, something of a 'Catch 22' situation; if they say it was merely human, of his own private initiative, they would antagonize the people who considered John to have been a prophet and God's messenger. Again when the Pharisees joined forces with the Herodians to entrap Jesus with a question about the validity and lawfulness of Roman taxes (Matthew 15-22; Mark 12.13-17; Luke 20.20-26), he turns the table on them by asking whose image and inscription is to be found on the coin they produce. Viviano notes this would have been a true question of conscience for Pharisees (but not for Herodians), in that to pay meant to acknowledge a foreign pagan sovereignty over Israel, and with a coin on which the Roman Emperor claimed to be divine, such as: “Tiberius Caesar son of the divine Augustus, great high priest” (1989.665). Similarly the following verses in each of the synoptic Gospels recount how that same day the Sadducees relate a tale of a widow whose seven sibling husbands had predeceased her, and ask in the resurrection (a resurrection that they themselves did not believe in) whose wife will she be? Viviano notes that as conservatives who accepted only the Pentateuch as revealed, they did not accept either the Greek understanding of the afterlife as immortality of the soul, or the Pharisaic view of it as resurrection of the body (1989.665, 666). Here Jesus tells them they have got it wrong, and they leave and: 'no longer dared to ask him any question' (Luke 20.40).

Even his disciples come in for criticism when they begin to argue about their precedence and status, failing to understand the revolutionary nature of Christ's teaching, as is illustrated when on the final journey to Jerusalem the mother of James and John seeks for her sons the seats of honour on either side of Jesus in his kingdom, much to the indignity of their companions. Luke's Gospel, with terrible paradox, places this request as made within the context of the Last Supper without specifying the individuals concerned. Trueblood considers Luke’s version has preserved the only touch of humour in this important incident, with laughter employed as the best weapon, when Jesus speaks about benefactors, and highlights that the chief amongst them must be as servant and slave by following his example of servanthood. Trueblood notes their complete failure to understand the revolutionary

nature of Christ's teaching, whereby: 'they cannot see that He is proposing an order in which the question of status is rendered irrelevant. This is the reason why the symbolic foot washing was necessary' (1964.87).

Trueblood draws attention to the connection which the nineteenth-century theologian Soren Kierkegaard made between deep religious experience and humour, for Kierkegaard believed the religious person discovers the comical in the largest measure, partly because such a person is acutely conscious of sharp inconsistencies, which, when made manifest, are potentially humorous. Kierkegaard also held that wherever there is life there is paradox, and wherever there is paradox, the comic element is present, at least potentially (1964.39).

Trueblood considers the essence of paradox is the recognition of a connection, often, of apparent opposites, a connection which makes possible both humour and poetry (1964.41), and believes paradox is necessary for the emergence of humour, but that it is not sufficient in itself, and though we do not know the ultimate secret of laughter, even laughter at ourselves, contradiction, or at least apparent contradiction has something to do with it (1964.44, 45). He acknowledges all people are to some extent hypocrites, because nobody can live up to their pretensions, but considers the fact that we are hypocrites is the source of most of our hope, as well as being the source of most of our anguish, because, as hypocrites, we are always vulnerable to ridicule (1964.40). Accordingly, Trueblood says: 'This is why it is easy for us to understand the meaning of Christ's wit when He directs His barbs at the religious. He is talking to us! But the purpose of allof the Gospel, even its jokes, is redemption' (1964.40). Trueblood believes one of the biggest mistakes we make in regard to the humour of Christ is our failure to recognise how Christ deliberately used preposterous statements to get his point across. If, from a false sense of piety, we try to force some literal truth out of it, he feels the result is often grotesque, for when interpreted with humorless seriousness, the playful becomes merely ridiculous (1964.46,`47).

By making statements in an exaggerated form, Christ made them memorable, something G.K. Chesterton termed *giantesque*, and are evident at many points in the Gospel. Clearly there is an element of humour here, which magnifies any highlighted absurdities. Trueblood believes we should keep in mind the evident purpose of Jesus' humour to be found in the Gospels is used to clarify and increase understanding rather than to hurt; however, some hurt is inevitable when human pride is rendered ridiculous, but the clear aim is something other than harm. In some instances irony sometimes moves over into sarcasm, but here Trueblood sees the sarcastic thrust as not being the

major factor. Instead it seems to belong to what George Meredith in *Comedy (being An Essay on Comedy, and Laughter*) by Henri Bergson (1956) describes as: 'the laughter of comedy', something which is: 'impersonal and of unrivalled politeness, nearer a smile' (1956.47). Trueblood notes how satire seems utterly absent in the humour preserved in the Gospels (1964.51). For him, the purpose of Jesus' laughter seems always the revelation of some facet of truth which would not otherwise be revealed, and is employed as a means of calling attention to something without which it might remain hidden or unappreciated, concluding: 'Truth, and truth alone, is the end' (1964.52).

Trueblood considers that Jesus' use of irony can lead to the unmasking of error, and thereby to the emergence of truth, and that in the first propagation of the Gospel, humour was part of the struggle (1964.53). Wylie Sypher, as the editor of Meredith and Bergson's book, tells us: 'the comic spirit keeps us pure in mind by requiring that we regard ourselves skeptically' (1956.252). For Trueblood, laughter, if taken aright, can have a purgative effect, and is redemptive when it leads to comic self-discovery (1964.54). For Meredith, in his essay, is sure God's laughter comes only with an underlying interest in our welfare, and is directed at our frailties, but its purpose is ultimately to heal (1956.48). Whilst Trueblood tells us Jesus employed several types of humour, irony is the most common, and was used by Jesus to hold up to public view either vice or folly, but always without a note of bitterness or the attempt to harm, he notes: 'The ironical is always marked with a subtle sharpness of insight, free from the desire to wound. This is what distinguishes it most clearly from sarcasm. Whereas sarcasm tends to be cutting, irony may be playful' (1964.55, 56).

Christ sometimes is seen to allow the logic of the situation to demonstrate itself by the use of the ironic question, one which requires no answer, such as 'Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?' (Matthew.7.16) When the imprisoned John the Baptist sends two emissaries to ask Jesus if he was the Messiah, he sends them back to report to John what they have seen and heard (Luke 7.22). Trueblood says the allusion to Isaiah 61 in his answer would have been clear to John. There is sly irony, too, regarding those who advertise their piety or their benevolence, when Jesus warns such to: 'Beware of practising your piety before men in order to be seen by them' (Matthew 6.1), and denounces those who trumpet their almsgiving as hypocrites do in order to be praised by men (Matthew 6.2). For both parties he says: 'They have their reward'. There is irony too in the questions Jesus asks the crowds about John the Baptist, when he asks them what they went out into the wilderness to see, a man in fine clothing? (Luke 7.24-26). When he warns about over-anxiety and being over-

concerned for the future, he uses the birds of the air and lilies of the field to make his point (Luke 12.12). Elsewhere he warns: 'each day has troubles of its own' (Matthew 6.34). When he says: 'Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged' (Matthew 7.1-2), he warns them to at least be consistent if they want to avoid judgement themselves. Here Trueblood finds Jesus' humour at its subtlest and deepest, and cites other examples of the gentle use of irony, which, whilst it might not produce a boisterous laugh, could nonetheless elicit a smile (1964.60). I believe this gentle humour of Jesus, and the points which Trueblood has highlighted, are important considerations towards suggesting and developing a Christian theology of laughter.

Trueblood suggests all Jesus stood for was intrinsically threatening to those in power, whether politically or religiously, that his continual battle for the minds and hearts of those around him required the use of various tactics and weaponry, such as his use of expressions of proverbial wisdom, or new epigrams and parables based upon the daily life of the common people. The religious opposition of the Pharisees saw him employ laughter as a weapon against them at the point where they were most vulnerable - their manifest self-righteousness. But that laughter was employed with gentleness and good humour, not intended to hurt or wound those against whom it was directed, as is clear from the various Gospel accounts.

Martin considers it is difficult to measure the extent to which joy and laughter have been denigrated, downplayed, or deemed inappropriate throughout religious history, or how this setting aside of lightheartedness may have occurred. But he thinks if joy is an obvious outgrowth of a life-giving faith, he questions: 'Why does it seem absent from so many religious settings?' Similarly: 'When, why, and how were joy, humour, and laughter removed from religion?' (2011.29, 30). The only negative against laughter in the Gospel accounts comes from the so-called 'Sermon on the Plain' in Luke 6.25: 'Woe to you that laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep'. However, a few verses earlier (6.21) Jesus says: 'Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh'. Kuschel remarks:

> It is wrong to conclude from this that Jesus was deadly serious, with no sense of humour, as church fathers and monks did. On the contrary, a force evidently emanated from Jesus of Nazareth which was capable of changing people's hearts and ridding them of anxiety (Luke 19.37; 24.41). The God whom Jesus tells in his parables is no God with an ambiguous laugh, nor a God whose laughter at rulers, wicked or even innocent

> people would be mocking and uncanny. He is not a God whose laughter divides, separates and condemns. (1994.73, 74)

We should feel encouraged with regard to our search for humour and laughter in the Gospel accounts that in his teaching contained in the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus assures us: 'there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance' (Luke 15.7) - something which the parable of the lost coin in the following verses conveys with a similar message. I believe we find similar encouragement too in the same chapter when we read the story of the prodigal son, which likens God to the boy's father who continually looks for his lost wastrel son, upon whose return he lavishes love and forgiveness, restoring him to the bosom of his family with a 'joyful feast' (Luke 15.24). Laughter may have been the order of the day, but that is not the response of the self-righteous 'slighted' elder brother.

3.4 Humour in the Fourth Gospel

In contrast to the Synoptic writers, John's Gospel gives us no birth narrative, and seems much less interested in a straightforward report of Jesus' life, but rather from the outset is mostly concerned with the theological significance of Jesus as the Christ, described in the Prologue as the "Word" who was with God, and was God. As Pheme Perkins points out in her *NJBC* commentary, John's Gospel no longer focuses on the Kingdom of God, or uses proverbs and parables, or appears in apophthegms (i.e. terse, pointed sayings, embodying an important truth in few words), such as pithy or sententious maxims. Perkins says: 'Instead, Jesus speaks in symbolic discourses, which often refer to his relationship with the Father' (1989.942). John the Baptist also makes his appearance in Chapter 1, and (after the call of the first disciples) Chapter 2 begins with the first 'sign' of Jesus' divinity at the Wedding Feast at Cana in Galilee (presented in John 2. 1-12) , where he: 'manifested his glory', and where: 'his disciples believed in him'. Perkins thinks: 'Whatever its origin, the Gospel uses the story for its symbolism about Jesus. The actual miraculous occurrence is mentioned almost in passing (v9) and never becomes a public demonstration of Jesus' power'. (1989.954). The joy and rejoicing of the marriage feast would normally be expected to extend to humour and laughter, particularly when the guests had such a substantial amount of good wine available to drink. This first of seven 'signs' recorded by John is to give explicit indication that in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the long anticipated Messiah, has come.

Unlike the Synoptic Gospels with the subtle humour of their parables, Trueblood points

to just two known examples of humour in St John's Gospel, although in both cases it seems to me that humour is rather weak. The first concerns the episode of the woman at the Well of Samaria (Jacob's Well) (John 4.4-26), which C.K. Barrett in his *Commentary* (1965) describes as:

> An unusual conversation, since it is between man and woman, Jew and Samaritan. Jesus' request for a drink serves to bring out a double contrast and parallelism, first between the "living" (flowing) water of the spring and the living water which is given by Jesus and is so called because it confers eternal life, and second between Jesus and Jacob as givers of water. (1965.191)

Barnabas Lindars in his *Commentary* (1972) thinks in this episode we have a situation reminiscent of the meeting of Abraham's servant with Rebekah (Genesis.24 10-27), and of Jacob and Rachel (Genesis 29. 1-12), a passage full of patriarchal allusions, which, whilst it might have been composed by John as an allegory, he thinks unlikely, since the literary technique of the Gospel develops the theological meaning (1972.179, 180), commenting: 'The story is more than a revelation-discourse. It is a model of the mission of the church' (1972.192). Robert Gordon Maccini (*JSNT* April 1994) thinks this story needs to be read and reassessed in the light of the Samaritan context, acknowledging that differences in beliefs, customs, and laws between Samaritans and Jews apply, where the misapplication of Jewish rabbinic laws to Samaritans is inappropriate. If these factors are taken into consideration, Maccini believes a very different alternative portrait of the woman emerges, in which her actions and words are not extraordinary.

As a Samaritan (of likely mixed race, but not entirely classed as Gentile), she is surprised that Jesus speaks to her, and asks him pious questions, but, according to Jesus, did not tell the whole truth (John 4.18). Jesus is aware of the sexual irregularity in her past and present lifestyle, and teases her to admit the truth. William Temple (1939) thinks she is puzzled by the living water "springing into eternal life" Jesus offers, but: 'bids her call her husband to share the gift', but in: 'fearing exposure of her manner of life, denies that she has a husband', a 'denial – intended as a lie in self defence – [which] is strictly true' (1939.58, 59). Lindars notes when she says she has 'no husband', this is a 'white lie', for she is reminded she has had five 'husbands' (1972.186), and is surprised by: 'Jesus' special insight confronting her with her life story', noting:'her present union does not constitute a true marriage, so that her white lie is ironically correct' (1972.186). Trueblood considers the sly insinuation is that she was not universally meticulous about the truth in the first place, which I assume is

where he finds Jesus' conversation with the woman humorous. Humour, perhaps yes, but not laughter! Rudolf Bultmann in *The Gospel of John: a Commentary* (1971) notes how vv. 10-15 employ the literary devices of *double-entendre* and misunderstanding, and in vv. 16-19 Jesus demonstrates his own omniscience in knowing the secret things hidden from others (1971.175,187). Barrett comments: 'Jesus is greater than Jacob because he gives water better by far. A disclosure of the woman's past life (which may or may not have allegorical significance) reveals to her that Jesus is a prophet, and she properly raises one of the outstanding questions between Jews and Samaritans, that of the rival merits of Jerusalem and Mount Gerizim' (1965.191).

The second concerns the woman taken in adultery and brought to Jesus by her accusers, now found in John 7.53 – 8.11 (but missing from the earliest and most reliable manuscripts and ancient witnesses – see NIV Study Bible footnote 1987.1579). Indeed, Trueblood sees this story as being of doubtful authenticity, and its placing in John's Gospel as tenuous. Perkins notes that this story did not find its way into manuscripts of the Gospel until the third century, and has none of the characteristic features of Johannine style or theology, but reflects a theme which appears in Luke's special tradition, and may have been Lucan material circulating within that tradition (1989.965). R.H. Lightfoot advises it was Jerome who included this episode here in his Vulgate version, and that Augustine of Hippo accepted it (1956.346). Lindars sees this as a fragment from an unknown work (possibly a non-canonical Gospel, but referred to in the *Didascalia*), which has by happy chance been preserved in the manuscript tradition of John (1972.305).

Lindars notes how, as presented in this episode, Jesus was able to deal compassionately with the woman, one whose guilt had rendered her liable to the death penalty, in that: 'He neither condones her sin nor denies the validity of the law' (1972.305). However, the story shows not only Jesus' compassion, but also his clever wit, with perhaps the humour to be found in the way Christ exposes the inconsistency of the critics and hypocrites who bring her for condemnation. The ridiculous contradiction is apparent when Christ says to them that the one who is totally innocent of offence, 'without sin', may cast the first stone. Marsh in his commentary considers when bending down to write with his finger on the ground: 'Jesus wished to avoid any suggestion that he was taking up the position of a judge', and writing 'in the dust', there would be no permanent record (1968.686). In his statement "I judge no one" he indicates: 'Sin, even of this kind, can be forgiven, and blotted out', and when the accusers had slunk away, and: 'he is prepared to act as judge again', he stands alone as the 'innocent' one, and: 'speaks the divine judgment on sin' (1968.687). Although on

the face of it finding humour and laughter in this episode seems tenuous, Trueblood is arguing the way Jesus dealt with the woman's accusers indicates Jesus' very subtle sense of humour, in turning the question of guilt or innocence back upon them. But for the woman, these words of Jesus certainly prove to be 'words against death'.

When considering the close relationship and friendship Jesus had with Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha (where he received the hospitality of their Bethany home when he came to Jerusalem, see Luke 10.38-42), we turn now to the episode where Martha, distracted with 'much serving', complains her sister Mary is not helping with the preparations for their guests (Luke 10.40). There is humour in the way Jesus chides her about being anxious and troubled when Mary has chosen the good portion by sitting at his feet and listening to his teaching (Luke 10.42). I believe the hospitality would have extended to shared humour and laughter whenever Jesus stayed in their company, especially after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead (recounted in John 11.1-44), which Perkins describes as: 'a sign that Jesus really is the power of life evident in resurrection, … [and that] this sign demonstrates that the Father has given power over life and death to the Son' (1989.969). Bultmann says: 'The crisis is coming on; … the passion is drawing near. The outward occasion of the fateful crisis is the raising of Lazarus, and the Evangelist has brilliantly illuminated the significance of the event' (1971.394). C.K. Barrett comments: 'The love of Jesus for his dead friend is manifest, and the expectation of the reader is aroused by the orthodox resurrection hope of the sisters, the tentative faith of some of the onlookers, and a saying of Jesus (vv.25f.)' (1965.322). R.H. Lightfoot comments:

> Thus the deeper meaning of the Lord's words in [John] 11.4 becomes clear; the Lord's revelation of Himself, not in an act of healing, as suggested and desired by the sisters, but as Himself the resurrection and the life, and shown to be such through the restoration of their brother, will be the immediate cause of the Lord's death upon the cross, and therefore of the glory of God, and therewith of the glorification of the Son of God. (1956.219)

Jesus' calling of Lazarus from the dead were certainly 'words against death', an episode which would lead to a direct clash with both Jewish religious and secular authorities in Jerusalem, and leads into the events of Holy Week, the Passion of Jesus, his Crucifixion, and then the Resurrection of Easter Day, the ultimate 'word against death'.

On coming to Bethany, Martha remonstrates with Jesus if he had been there, Lazarus

would not have died, yet shows faith in Jesus and in the resurrection at the last day, with Jesus replying he himself is the resurrection and the life. After similarly encountering Mary in the house, he weeps with the sisters as they come to the tomb of Lazarus, before ordering the stone covering it be removed, and the dead man called out, with orders for him to be released from the bandages which bound him. Wendy E. S. North (*JSNT* September 2013) aims to account for two aspects of the Lazarus story, relating to the words both Mary and Martha use to greet Jesus, and his earlier unexplained absence and delay, which it is claimed was of crucial concern to John's readership, whose cohesion was threatened by persecution, and whose faith in Jesus' return at the eschaton was growing increasingly fragile. North believes the story provides consolation for John's flock by reminding them of the abiding presence of Jesus in their midst by the advantageous presence of the Holy Spirit, and was to strengthen their resolve in the face of death by his emphasis in the resurrection to life on Judgement Day as a present guarantee for those who believe in Jesus.

Lindars considers Jesus' practical command to 'let him (Lazarus) go' is comparable to Mark 5.43 where Jesus commands Jairus' daughter should be given food, noting: 'The ending of the story is abrupt. Nothing further needs to be said. The type of the Resurrection has been accomplished' (1972.403). Returning with them to the house to rejoice at the raising of their brother from the dead, would have been an occasion where one might expect laughter to be shared as the grief and anxiety of past days were dispelled, and where its use as a 'word against death' would have been appropriate. That grief and anxiety will return soon enough in the days of his Passion which follow. In the meantime the word of Jesus is here a 'word against death', as will be the laughter which his own empty tomb will represent as the significance of the resurrection is revealed. Bultmann comments: 'The raising of Lazarus provides the impetus for the resolution of the Sanhedrin that Jesus must die (John 11.47-53)', and the recollection of this miracle afterwards confirms yet again the decision for his death (John 12.17-19) (1971.394, 395). We follow the Gospel story of Jesus through to the Crucifixion, but that is not the finale, for as Cote points out:

> There would be another burst of cosmic humour, even more unforeseeable, when another angel on another occasion announced to a disbelieving world the biggest practical joke of all, "He is risen, he is not here" (Matthew 28.6). (1986.53)

Here I would argue that Cote's description of the resurrection as an expression of cosmic humour is perhaps better described as comedy rather than humour, but in any

event I would see such cosmic laughter engendered by the resurrection as a key plank in my own understanding of a Christian theology of laughter. For the resurrection of Jesus is and must be the ultimate ‘word against death’, something the Christian Church has always seen as having cosmic significance, and as the key event which vindicates Jesus and his ministry and teaching. This is God’s answer to all his detractors, and a laugh of the ultimate triumph over death, the supreme and final ‘word against death’, marking the inauguration and opening of the Kingdom of Heaven to all who put their faith and trust in Jesus, and the assurance of his promises. Here is the greatest assurance from God that it is alright to laugh, as humour, joy, and laughter prove to be 'words against death' in the light of the empty tomb of Jesus.

In the meantime this episode of the raising of Lazarus at Bethany will quickly lead into the events yet to unfold in what Christians call Holy Week. Whilst the New Testament writers might not report the laughter of Jesus, they most certainly do report how he was laughed at during his life, and how therefore in many ways has also become an archetype for laughed-at believers. Kuschel notes:

> So at the end of the story of Jesus we do not have the image of a laughing God or a laughing saviour but the image of a laughed at fool, who stands for God. At the end we have the stifled laugh, the killed-off joy; at the end we have the pain and crying of the executed man and the malice and mockery of the executioners. Here – in a comparison of religions – Christianity claims a distinctive feature. (1994.81)

Here, when the events of Holy Week culminate in the Crucifixion, we have what St Paul describes as folly to Greeks, and a scandal to the Jews (1 Cor. 1.23); the folly and scandal of the Cross of Christ. Not apparently an immediately obvious scene for laughter to take place, at least on the part of sorrowing women who stood there and watched events, not for his disciples who in most Gospel accounts were noticeably absent, nor for those who in subsequent generations would become Christians, for whom the Crucifixion would appear to be no laughing matter. And yet it is precisely here that some theologians have found laughter to comment upon, and laughter over and above the sneering, mocking, and deriding laughter of those who brought Jesus to that Cross and to that shameful and humiliating death.

As such, this wider consideration of laughter will be looked at in more detail in later sections of this work, where the views of people like the Renaissance humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam draw our attention to how those who sought Christ's death saw

him as mad, deranged or foolish. More recent scholars such as Gilhus have seen the recovery of laughter in the Church as spilling over from the place of laughter in our present culture, to a large extent deriving from modernist and post-modernist influences and perspectives. Michael Screech (1997), in examining changing Christian attitudes to laughter, entitles his work *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross*, and reflects upon this particular phenomenon, and in doing so, draws our attention to the writings of other scholars of the past.

3.5 The Passion and Crucifixion of Jesus

At Calvary Jesus hanging naked upon the Cross is mocked and sneered at. Those who joked: 'He trusts in God! Let him deliver him if he will have him! (Matthew 27.42) display laughter in one of the ways in which a crowd may react to the suffering of another dehumanised individual in a thoughtless, cruel, wicked or vindictive manner. Anthony Towey considers: 'The events leading up to the death of Jesus and the happenings during and after his execution are at the centre of Christian Theology' (2013.125). This is but the prelude to the events of Easter Day: 'where women become the unlikely heralds of an unlikely claim, but one which would define the eventual Christian movement' (2013.125).

I particularly focus here upon the work of Michael Screech (1997) as my principal interlocutor, for Screech says: 'The laughter directed at Christ in his agony came from a crowd revelling in the sight of a harsh punishment righteously inflicted upon an idealist blasphemer', that such laughter may surface at any time, and that: 'in times of war as in times of peace, pain and suffering can readily evoke mocking laughter', suggesting to him: 'perhaps most forms of laughter involve an element of cruelty' (1997.17). Screech notes how throughout history some moralists have thought it right and proper to laugh at the misfortunes of those considered to be enemies; this is something that Socrates did in Philebus (39D), and that Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologica* (III Suppl., qu.94, art1) thought enjoying a 'perfect view' of the punishment tortures of the impious and damned was one of the pleasures the elect had to look forward to in the future. Even Erasmus, picking up on a Greek proverb cited by Sophocles, reminds us: 'To laugh at the enemy is the sweetest of laughter' (1997.18). Well, Jesus' enemies certainly laughed that day, but I suggest such laughter of superiority and mocking involving an element of cruelty which seems contrary to how many might envisage a Christian theology of laughter, although Jacqueline Bussie's work on the laughter of the oppressed (considered later in chapters six and seven), provides further insights upon the laughter we find at the foot of the cross.

Turning to the accounts of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus in the four Gospels, we find words for laughter are rare, implied rather than specified. Screech suggests: ‘It was not so much in the New Testament that Christians found thinly veiled references to mocking laughter directed against Jesus during his trial and Crucifixion: it was in the Old’ (1997.19), noting how Erasmus found various references to mocking laughter against the Christ within there, often half-hidden, half-revealed. However, seen through the prism of Christian faith, these seem to have been foretold by these earlier writings, not least in some Psalms, but also in Isaiah's 'Man of Sorrows' (53.3), where Erasmus suggests: 'the laughter at Christ was prophetically foreseen and therefore did occur' (Screech 1997.19).

Events of the Passion presented in the Gospels of both Matthew and Mark show Jesus mocked, abused, and held up for ridicule in the Palace of the Roman governor Pilate (not mentioned by Luke, and only briefly by John). Stephen Halliwell sees Jesus as a mute character in a minature 'comedy', where the laughter used by the soldiers against Jesus is one of degradingly spiteful derision, embedded in a framework of cruelly fantasised role playing (2008.472). Halliwell sees this aggressive ridiculing of Jesus as the social focusing of laughter on a spotlighted individual, giving the soldiers a temporary escape from the rigours of obedient discipline, allowing them to give vent to pent-up anti-authoritarianism – an outburst of *Schadenfreude* reinforced by casual violence (2008.472, 473). In their spitting and kneeling before Jesus dressed in the purple robe and crown of thorns, Halliwell detects a parodic distortion of the kiss of homage, by way of vicious gloating over a doomed enemy (2008.474).

Screech highlights how the Latin word *illudo* is used for 'to mock' in both Matthew and Luke in the Vulgate translation, where the scoffers mocked and made sport of Jesus, and tried to make a laughing stock of him, the laughter employed being implied as cruel. However, in Mark (but also in Matthew) the Greek word *empaizo* is used for 'to mock', which Screech suggests is to scoff as a child scoffs, laughter akin to the pitiless laughter of children. When it comes to the harsh laughter of scoffing mocking Jesus on the Cross*, blasphemeo* is used for 'to revile' in both Matthew and Mark, indicating that Jesus was: ‘taunted as a cruel child might laugh and taunt for the sheer fun of it’ (1997.24, 25). Although there are prior incidents recorded where Jesus had been mocked before (Matthew 9:24; 16:14; Luke 8:53), Screech notes: 'In life as in death Jesus provoked the kind of laughter encapsulated in that verb *derideo*: he was scoffed at' (1997.27).

Allan T Georgia (*JSNT* September 2013) identifies traces of a traditional Roman

triumph in both Mark 11 and Mark 15, allowing Mark to exploit the degradation of Jesus' passion as undermining the performance of Roman power, and in doing so portraying Jesus as a king, and thereby a threat to Rome. The Roman triumph paradoxically magnified its victims by drawing a close parallel between the victim's kingly status and the conqueror's grandeur. Georgia believes the logic of such a triumph is employed by Mark to transform Jesus' status as victim into an assertion of his authority, thereby emerging as a ritualized assertion of Jesus' Davidic kingship, and in doing so, translating it to the purposes of the gospel message.

Interestingly, Screech suggests in those passages where the New Testament writers cite their ancient Bible for specific prophecies as duly fulfilled in Christ, these were held to convey facts considered to be as historical as any of the details given by the actual Gospel writers themselves. These too also came to be considered as Gospel truth, through tradition both supplementing and complementing the testimony of the Apostles (1997.28), and that later, other prophecies too (not specifically cited in the New Testament) came to be recognised by the Church, whereby Screech considers: 'Echoes of the Old Testament in the New are not simply literary ornaments. For the Renaissance Christian such echoes and veiled prophecies were God-given correspondences, not backdated prophecies' (1997.28). Erasmus was one of those influential voices encouraging the seeking of Christ and the Gospel in earlier Hebrew Scripture, seen as part of the divine plan that the Old Testament should foreshadow the New (1997.31,32), and Screech thinks: 'For Erasmus, those who are vouchsafed the grace to discover the New Testament veiled in the Old are driven outside themselves; they glimpse the unfolding of God's providence', believing that in such glimpses: 'that deeper testimony to men's laughing at Christ is to be found' (1997.28, 29).

One obvious and well known example is the opening verse of Psalm 22, uttered by Jesus on the Cross as a cry of dereliction, which Screech suggests: 'was seen as a shadow, providentially cast beforehand by the supreme reality which is the Crucifixion. As such the psalm can gloss the texts of the Gospels; it can fill in gaps and supply details not given in the New Testament, details otherwise unknowable' (1997.29). Similarly, the verses of the psalm which follow that cry, illuminate the laughter and scorn of those who mocked and abused Jesus on the Cross, with Screech suggesting: 'that laughter, implicit in the New Testament, is explicit in its foreshadowing' (1997.29). Screech cites John 19.28, when Jesus is being offered wine mingled with myrrh (gall), seen as: 'all part of that scoffing prophetically foreshadowed' in Psalm 69 (1997.30, 31); and similarly, the 'wagging of heads' of the scoffers finds itself echoed/foreshadowed in Isaiah 37.22, and in Jeremiah 18.16, Lamentations 2.15, and

Ecclesiasticus 12.18; also how “they shall look at him whom they have pierced” (John 19.37), is foreshadowed in Zechariah 12.10.

In the Old Testament, Elijah's righteous deriding of the prophets of Baal (I Kings 18) was seen as an analogy of the mocking directed at Jesus as he hung upon the Cross, with its railing satire of *diasyrm*, intended to tear him apart, and the episode of the mocking children who called Elisha 'baldy' (2 Kings 2. 23-25) was seen as prefiguring the subsequent mocking of Christ on Calvary. Screech notes:

> Holy Writ unambiguously showed that the very kind of laughter which is abominable when aimed at Elisha or at Christ can be directed – at error, and especially at heresy and blasphemy. The jeering at the priests of Baal became a proof-text justifying harsh laughter of all sorts. … Such diasyrm is inseparable from the history of Judaeo-Christian laughter. (1997.40, 41)

Screech thinks those who, from the foot of the Cross, laughed at Jesus in his anguish, did so because they took him for a fool (1997.67), with high priests, soldiers, crowds and thieves all laughing at Christ during his trial and passion, being sure he was mad, because of his insane delusions about rebuilding the Temple in three days and being the Son of God (1997.68). Screech suggests:

> Christ's irony while on earth was no different. It was a form of *irrisio*. Jesus laughed and jeered at those who deserved it. The rich man in the parable was about to die, yet he was planning to build barns in which to amass even more of this world's goods; many, like him, are irrational, mad. Each to the other seems insane. (1997.68)

Screech considers this laughter directed at Christ on the Cross is deeply disturbing because it involves us, and just as the laughers show no pity to him, neither do they deserve any, for he suggests pity is incompatible with the laughter welling up at the foot of the Cross, and that what makes laughter good or evil is its target (1997.78). This takes us back to the question the scribes raised in Mark 3 about whether Jesus was either mad or possessed, where his family had appeared with the intention of restraining him. But I would argue it also challenges us with the same question Jesus asked his disciples at Caesarea Philippi ‘Who do people say the son of man is?’ (Mark 8.27-29, Matthew 16.13-16, Luke 9.18-20). Here I suggest Screech challenges us to decide exactly where we stand, what we actually believe about Jesus, and ultimately whose side we are on, because, as he reminds us, it involves us. In the crucifixion of

Jesus, we are involved, whether we like it or not.

Gerard Vossius in *Harmoniae Evangelicae* (Opera, Amsterdam, 1701, vol. VI) identifies four categories of people who mocked Jesus on the Cross (Screech 1997.79), namely: (1) those who wagged their heads and taunted him about rebuilding the Temple in three days, and urged him to come down from the Cross; (2) the chief priests who scoff at him, and gloat 'He saved others: he cannot save himself'; (3) the soldiers who urged him to save himself if he were the 'King of the Jews', as per Pilate's inscription; (4) in Luke 23 one of the thieves crucified with him railed at him 'If you be the Christ, save yourself and us'. In these various ways there is cruel and mocking laughter at the foot of the Cross; in the Synoptic Gospels, a scene of pathos and utter dereliction until Jesus' inevitable death occurs.

John's Gospel is rather more hope-filled, seeing Jesus in control of events from his arrest in Gethsemane, and in his appearance before Pilate; and it is almost as though Jesus reigns from the Cross before surrendering his spirit to God. For those who led Jesus to Crucifixion the story was supposed to end with his humiliation and death. But of course, that was not the end of the story as far as Christians and the Gospel accounts are concerned, and Kuschel comments: ‘Jesus' joy was evidently indestructible ... [and] found its expression in belief in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus by God. In this way the earliest community expressed their conviction that lamentation and mourning do not have the last word’ (1994. 83). Here, he says, is: 'The Christian parallel to Psalm 2: resurrection as an expression of God's laughter at death. What is that if not Easter jubilation, Easter laughter?' (1994.84). My comment here is to suggest God's laughter at death must surely parallel our own, and must accordingly provide us through the employment of laughter with 'words against death', which are to be found our own Easter joy and Easter laughter.

Mark’s final chapter (16. 1-18) brings us to the empty tomb in which the dead body of Jesus had been laid, a tomb now empty in the light of the resurrection, and the reason for such Easter joy and Easter laughter. Guy J. Williams (*JSNT* March 2013) draws upon spatial theory to analyse and describe this setting he sees as full of religious and cultural significance, exploring the borderland between life and death through themes of space and time, where all is ultimately transformed by a well-constructed angelic revelation, in which the women visitors become prophetic recipients of the Gospel commission to Peter and the disciples to meet the risen Jesus in Galilee. But most scholars think that Mark's Gospel here is brought to a stark but decisive ending where the women flee astonished and trembling with fear, and say nothing to anyone, with the

rest that follows on a later accretion.

For Christians, the Cross of Christ is not seen as either a subject for laughter or an object of laughter, since it represents one of the most horrendous and humiliating forms of public execution devised by humankind. So for Christians such laughter at the foot of the Cross is deemed inappropriate. The Crucifixion is not just about a most horrible means of execution, but also an event of *spiritual* and *theological* pain for the Son to be separated from the Father and bearing humankind's guilt. However, in the light of the resurrection of Jesus, it may be seen as a symbol of hope and even a source of joy through the victory and vindication. The Cross becomes Christ's last and final paradox in his earthly life and ministry. In the Western tradition of the Catholic Church, the Good Friday Liturgy of the Passion of the Lord is enacted as the events of the Paschal Mystery are recalled before the Veneration and Adoration of the Holy Cross on this most Solemn Holy Day in the Christian calendar, when rejoicing as such is entirely inappropriate.

That rejoicing takes place on Holy Cross Day, 14th September, which is kept as the Feast known as either 'The Exaltation of the Holy Cross' or 'The Triumph of the Cross'. In the Preface for Holy Cross Day in The Roman Missal (2011), God is reminded: "For you placed the salvation of the human race on the wood of the Cross, so that, where death arose, life might again spring forth and the evil one, who conquered on a tree, might likewise on a tree be conquered, through Christ our Lord." The hope and the joy symbolised by the empty Cross of Christ is seen anew in the light of the Resurrection. Here the Cross is a 'word against death', the icon of the Christ who hung thereon a 'word against death', and the liturgy too is a 'word against death', and in this light there is the prospect of 'laughter at the foot of the Cross', because that laughter must surely also be accounted a 'word against death', even though the Cross itself is not and never can be the object or subject of Christian laughter. That remains the province of those who mocked and derided him when Jesus was first nailed to it on Calvary, and of those who continue to mock both Christ and his disciples today.

3.6 The Letters Ascribed to Paul

Before we leave the New Testament, Martin highlights St Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians as a 'Study in Joy', and possibly the earliest written text in the New Testament (perhaps written by Paul in either Athens or Corinth *circa* 50CE). Here Paul encourages his fellow Christians in the church he had founded to have confidence in the "Second Coming" of Jesus, and in the meantime encouraging them to lead holy

lives, and to have an abiding confidence in God. 'Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you' (1 Thessalonians 5.16-18). Martin comments that '"rejoice always" does not mean that we should simply "look on the bright side" in the face of injustice', but that: 'Joy, prayer, and gratitude – are intimately bound together' (2011.215). 'The Apostle Paul advises three things, and the first of these is joy' (2011.217).

Joy is not laughter, but may lead into it. Paul's three abiding qualities, Faith, Hope, and Love/Charity (1 Corinthians 13.13 RSV/KJV)) are not quite the same as joy; nonetheless, I think they give us grounds for Christian laughter as we too: 'Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, Rejoice' (Philippians 4.4). However, the joyful Paul is also serious in his handling of opposition, as, for example, is found in his letter to the Galatians, and of foolishness and immaturity of Christians in his churches, as, for example, most obviously in his letters to the Corinthians. In the Letter to the Galatians Paul derides and challenges those of the circumcision party who would impose in full the precepts of Judaism upon his gentile converts, even going to Jerusalem to argue and win his case, and noting how in Antioch, he had challenged the apparent double-standards of Cephas (Peter), who had separated himself from eating with the gentiles, fearing the circumcision party when they arrived in town (Galatians 2). Gentle mockery and derisive laughter is also targeted against the 'foolish Galatians', with Paul reminding them that they had received the Spirit by hearing the gospel in faith, not by works of the law (Gal. 3. 1-3). So it seems to me that Paul's use of such mockery and derision is very much tempered by this gentleness, and unprovocative self-effacing, one aimed at restoration and correction of the misguided, i.e., their rehabilitation, not their removal from the household of faith. Extended to apply to a Christian theology of laughter, I believe it is one which should aim to provide such similar positive results, but one achieved by means of using any mockery and derision both carefully and sparingly.

In 1 Corinthians 1 he calls on the Corinthian church to be united in the same mind and the same judgement to overcome quarreling and dissensions he has detected amongst them, and reminds them that they have nothing to boast about in God's presence, and of the self-emptying *kenosis* and sacrifice of Christ upon the cross, which must not be emptied of its power by their foolishness and behaviour. This self-emptying and self-effacing *kenosis*, itself emulating the example of Christ on the cross, and reckoning others as better than yourself (Romans 12.3), I believe is an entirely appropriate attitude of mind in which to apply a Christian theology of laughter, and therefore to be incorporated within it, a point highlighted by Bussie.

In a similar vein, in 1 Corinthians 11, we find Paul deriding and admonishing the members of the Corinthian church for the divisions and factions apparent amongst them when they gather to celebrate the sacramental Eucharistic feast. Paul's mockery and derision at their laughable parody of the sacred meal is therefore not intended to hurt or harm, but as a stern but kindly corrective, along the lines that Jesus sought to use against the double-standards of the scribes and Pharisees. But, above all, we should view Paul as the apostle of joy, which can be seen in his life and expression of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in his very letter to the Galatians, i.e., 'the fruit of the Spirit is love, *joy*, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control' (Galatians 5. 22,23 RSV).

Given the very broad scope of this thesis, I have concentrated more on looking for evidence of humour and laughter in the biblical writings rather than on joy and mirth, although these clearly come into play, since the Gospels themselves are regarded as news of great joy, as attested by the angelic choir heralding the news of Jesus' birth at Bethlehem. In a book review of *Joy: The Meaning of the Sacraments* by Peter Waddell (2012), Dr Alec Graham, former Bishop of Newcastle, notes how: 'Joy ranks high in St. Paul's list of the fruits of the Spirit, and it has a place in most of his letters and the farewell discourses of St. John's Gospel' (*Church Times* 28/ 3/ 2013.36). Graham regrets that joy does not feature much in Christian understanding of the sacraments of the Church, perhaps because it is seen as perilously close to enthusiasm, in the sense of unbridled excitement. But he considers that the use of the word "celebration" with reference to some sacramental rites, suggests that joy must complement the solemnity that properly attaches to them, not so much earthly joy, but at least the joy of heaven, and of Jesus himself. That sense of joy pervades the New Testament, and can contribute towards developing a Christian theology of laughter, and since joy leads to hope, and hope and faith conquer fear, they may help us to see Christian laughter in the context of a 'word against death'.

In this chapter I believe there is sufficient evidence presented here to indicate that laughter and humour undergird the life and teachings of Jesus, and thereby the laughter of God himself. Along with the philosopher Hans Lenk (1987), Kuschel believes: 'the "deeper significance" of philosophy is brought out with the aid of amusing paradoxes, word-plays, ideas, surprises and so on' (1994.xviii), and these have been examined in the Gospel material here. Kuschel believes we need to understand the reality of God himself in the light of the category of laughter, and define the function of such talk of God for men and women and their existence in the world, in a way in which a theology of laughter derives its legitimation from 'the laughter of God' himself about

the state of his creation (1994.xviii). For Kuschel: ‘A theology of laughter must begin at a deeper level than laughable, comic phenomenon in the realm of the sacred and the hierarchical, and go deeper than presenting itself in a witty, jokey, ironic and anecdotal form’ (1994.xviii), and in this I would concur, for I believe that in the New Testament it seems possible to suggest a valid theology of laughter, something which will be further developed in the final chapters.

But the New Testament writings are not the only contemporary source of information and reflection upon the life, significance, and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. In this following section we turn to the texts of the various ‘Gnostic’ Christian and allied groups for an examination of their particular beliefs concerning him, and to briefly examine where references to laughter and the laughable are to be found. In doing so I suggest we will gain a broader perspective upon the period when this material and many New Testament works were being written, and are part of the context in which the early Church came to develop and define its own doctrine and structure, together with the generally accepted canon of the New Testament, often to counter and address the claims and beliefs of those Gnostic groups.

3.7 The Gnostic Beliefs and Relevant Texts concerning Laughter and the Laughable in the Christian 'Gnostic' Writings

Some of the 'Gnostic' texts found in the Nag Hammadi Library discovered in Egypt in 1945 are relevant to this research project, as there are more clues for laughter within the context of Gnostic Christianity, than in any of their more orthodox contemporaries. It is generally acknowledged by most scholars that there is no such thing as ‘Gnosticism’ as such, but that it is a term applied to encompass various groups of mostly early Christian believers who later came to be adjudged as heretics, but which itself is not an ancient term, and only dates back to the seventeenth century. My aim here is to highlight how laughter was present in those early Gnostic groups and their writings, and provide a descriptive overview of this movement, citing examples of laughter within its early literature, before coming to conclusions having examined all the material reviewed in these two biblical chapters.

Until the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library, evidence of ‘Gnostic’ belief and practice was mediated largely through the lens of their fellow Christian opponents, since this is not the first group to have been effectively silenced and largely excluded from the subsequent prevailing historical record, being lost for many centuries to both history and scholarship. The Nag Hammadi find gave scholars access to the writings of

some of these various groups in twelve papyrus codices for the first time. It is my intention to treat theologies of laughter as they emerge in ‘Gnostic’ texts as examples of early Christian thought, and not dismiss or rule them out as heresy. Rather, I believe they give us valuable insight into early Christian debates around laughter, and present alternative theologies to those which came to hold sway in later centuries, and therefore may represent subjugated Christian ways of knowing and reflection which deserve to be considered in their own right rather than through the lens of ‘heresy’.

Noting there is no single strand to follow in Gnosticism, and evidently various different and diverse ‘Gnostic’ groups, we are left with a multi-stranded weave of material covering various complex and diverse groupings, each with very different ideas and emphases, but with the common defining characteristic, that being a claim to special hidden knowledge (Greek *gnosis*) of ‘knowing’, but together forming one tradition of ‘awakening’, denied to those who were not initiates. This claim is exemplified in some of the writings which failed to be accepted by the early Church, and were therefore not incorporated into the authorised canon of scriptural books of the New Testament from amongst the wide-ranging variety of texts and documents circulating in those early centuries after Christ. But importantly here, these Gnostic texts give us remarkable additional insights into laughter within a religious context. Indeed, it was in contesting the various Gnostic claims and beliefs, that orthodox Christianity came to better define what it saw as the true doctrine regarding the Church’s understanding and belief concerning the person of Jesus, and the truth of the gospel message.

Graham Stanton (2002) considers for the student of early Christianity, the Nag Hammadi writings are almost as important as the Dead Sea Scrolls (2002.124), particularly highlighting the *Gospel of Thomas,* noting: 'For the readers of Thomas, it is the esoteric, timeless *words* of the living Jesus, not his actions, his death and resurrection, which are the key to salvation. These sayings convey to the reader crucial secret wisdom or knowledge' (2002.125). Stanton questions whether the sayings in Thomas, which have their earlier synoptic counterparts, may potentially have more authenticity, given the independence of their source, and therefore whether they represent an invaluable tradition more likely to go back to Jesus of Nazareth (2002.127). The point he raises fully justifies further study, and the inclusion of these texts within the parameters being explored in this thesis. When looking at some of the texts of those early Christians we find the central message of 'awakening' or '*gnosis*' proclaimed loud and clear. As such these teachings of awakening are not exclusively Christian, but express the insights of various groups in the various languages of their diverse cultures, with Gnosticism being described as 'the perennial philosophy'

because it has been found in all cultures and all times.

By the end of the second century CE, the Christian movement had divided into two opposing camps, the Gnostics and the orthodox, with orthodox theologians such as Justin Martyr and Tertullian, who taught Jesus' story was a factual account of miraculous events; that Jesus was a real man who had actually lived, and what was indicated in some of the pagan myths had happened to him in reality. However, for the Gnostics the story of Jesus is an allegory and initiation myth based on the ancient pagan myths, every detail of which could be decoded to reveal profound mystical teachings about *gnosis*, and Jesus himself equated with the pagan dying and resurrecting Godman under a new name, with some Gnostics even equating Jesus directly with the 'Attis' of Asia Minor (see Freke and Gandy 2005.57).

Elaine H. Pagels (1973) draws attention to how, in the Valentinian tradition, we find the earliest known authors to have produced exegetical commentaries on what Origen describes as the “evangelistic and apostolic sayings”. These Christian Gnostics not only produced the earliest known commentary on any New Testament writing with Heracleon’s commentary on John (*circa* 160-180 CE), but together with his contemporary Ptolemy, offered a systematic exegesis of the Johannine prologue. Pagels considers that their theology also developed a systematic hermeneutical methodology based on a definite theological structure, thereby providing a “spiritual” or “symbolic” exegesis for Gnostic initiates (1973. dust jacket).

Pagels notes at an even earlier date, Naassenes and Peratae had referred to the Fourth Gospel to the virtual exclusion of the Synoptics, noting how Irenaeus was the first to call these diverse interpreters of the Christian message “Gnostics”, and who, together with Clement and Origen, regarded the Valentinian exegesis of John’s Gospel as hopelessly “arbitrary” and “contrived” as far as their own Johnannine exegesis was concerned (1973.16). These early Christian theologians considered the Gnostics were people who believed their ‘orthodox’ Christian contemporaries had misinterpreted what they saw as the real revelation in Christ, by succumbing to a basic error in their preoccupation with the historical reality of Jesus. For the Gnostics, this was quite unnecessary; the Jesus of history was irrelevant, and what really mattered was the Gnostic Christ. Pagels points out the Gnostic theologians did not necessarily *deny* that the events proclaimed of Jesus had occurred in history, but denied that the actuality of these “events” mattered theologically, seeing this as far as they were concerned as a failure to determine between literal and symbolic truth (1973.13).

Pagels considers the Naassene and Peratae exegesis offer a basis for analogy and

comparison with the more sophisticated exegesis of the Valentinian Gnostics, all of which claim to accept both Jewish and Christian traditions, insofar as these are interpreted in accordance with their own theological and exegetical principles, i.e., surpassing the mere literal reading of “scripture” to disclose the “deeper mysteries” hidden within the texts (1973.23, 24). Within that Valentinian tradition, Christ is often shown rebuking his disciples for taking his symbolic statements literally, and thereby mistaking literal, historical *data* for actual spiritual truth. Pagels says from this *Gnostic* viewpoint, Heracleon sees these events as “images” which do not in themselves *effect* redemption, but symbolise the process of redemption within those who perceive their inner meaning (1973.14). For Heracleon, the “earthly Jesus”, whose presence dominates the Synoptic Gospels, is interpreted by the revelation of the Christ in terms of its inner, symbolic meaning, with “spiritual exegesis” demonstrating the “error” of literal reading in orthodox Christianity, rather than raising the readers’ consciousness to the level of symbolic interpretation (1973.14). In the Valentinian tradition expounded in Heracleon’s writings, the simple Gospel narratives are seen as allegories which need to be read “spiritually”, with both Jewish and Christian writings regarded as a corpus of symbolically written sacred literature. To understand their meaning requires an “initiation into gnosis” (1973.14, 15). Within that tradition, Valentinius, Basilides, Marcus, Ptolemy, Heracleon, and Theodotus all distinguished themselves as skilled and articulate intellectuals during the second century CE.

Pagels comments these Gnostic theologians denied that they had separated themselves from the common “postulate”, and, indeed, they continued to identify themselves to some extent with the Christian majority, despite holding contrary views regarding the person and nature of Jesus, and the significance of their own Gnostic Christ (1973.11, 12). However, Pagels points out that in Alexandria at that time, scholars and theologians such as Clement and Origen were still active, and held not dissimilar views from Valentinians when it came to apprehending the scriptures as ‘religious literature’. Whilst they also sought to expound its “hidden” symbolic meaning, yet nonetheless, they developed their own theological reflection along more traditional and ‘orthodox’ lines, on the basis of the Church’s faith as believed and accepted by the “common postulate” (1973.16). Pagels says the Gnostics believed:

> Since truth consists in a potentially universal process of coming to “know” the spiritual meaning of existence, they claim that only those who have been initiated and have “become truly gnostics” are able to perceive the “great and ineffable mystery” underlying the words of sacred text. (1973.15)

So for the Gnostics, Jesus' sayings express knowledge of the "mysteries" of human existence, so that the "earthly Jesus", along with the "simple" reading of the Gospels, is rejected, including the accounts of his life, death, and resurrection (1973.5). On this basis, Pagels suggests for the Gnostics, the Gospels offer only the metaphysical form of the ineffable truth (1973.16), and reports that Irenaeus perceived the Gnostic theologians were not simply reacting against naively "popular" versions of Christian teaching, but were challenging the fundamental theological standpoint of not only the actual numerical majority, but of theologians and spokesmen such as himself, Justin, Tertullian, and Hippolytus (1973.12). Irenaeus and Justin continued to insist that "the Church" stands on the conviction that "God was made man" in Jesus of Nazareth, one who lived, suffered, and died "in the flesh" and was raised from the dead. For them, these beliefs stand as "first principles of the gospel" (1973.13).

John Dart (1976) in recalling the discovery and significance of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic Library, provides a useful overview of the texts recovered in 1945, indicating the extensive use of laughter and humour in both the texts, and by the Gnostics against their opponents, and finally as used against them and their interpretation of Jesus. Dart's work identified these three types of laughter associated with the Gnostics and their writings. Firstly, it began with the sense of superiority the Gnostics held with regard to their 'unenlightened' Christian contemporaries, which overall reflects the derisive laughter of mockery and superiority we find evidenced in the Hebrew Bible. Secondly, this type of laughter continued within the Gnostic texts, which frequently derided, mocked, and downplayed the status of the God of the Hebrews, and often subverted much of the biblical foundational mythology concerning figures from the ancient past. Then thirdly, in the final phase, the laughter was turned upon them by the Christian orthodoxy that was being firmly established with the development of Christian doctrine and canon of authorised scripture, particularly after the status of Christianity was established in the Roman Empire by Constantine and his successors. This also seems to me to fall into the category of the mocking and derisive laughter of superiority found in the Old Testament.

Dart notes: 'Laughter echoes throughout the Gnostic Library: Eve laughs at the Gods who try to rape her; the Gnostics laugh at the world that attempts to constrict them' (1976. dust jacket). He describes Gnosticism as a complex religion of individualism, pessimism, and doubt, with the Gnostic secrets, ignored during the formation of Western religious thought, now standing provocatively before us, in which he believes ancient parallels to current concerns can be perceived. He considers these more recent discoveries give us new insights into the formative years of both today's

Judaism, and its giant offspring, Christianity (1976. xiii), and: ‘Without the Gnostic crisis, it would have taken longer for the church to form creeds, to select the books to be included in the New Testament, and to give authority to bishops’ (1976. xvi).

Richard Valantasis in his detailed commentary on *The Gospel of Thomas* (1997) presents it as an integral part of this library of early Christian writings, which he believes can inform us about the literature of the Judeo-Christian tradition and early Christianity, and that these Nag Hammadi texts represent the theological and religious artefacts of people for whom they were extremely important (1997. Preface). He notes how these were curiously preserved in the precinct of an orthodox Christian monastery at Cheoboskion in the Egyptian desert, and highlights how they were written in Coptic, a language not traditionally identified with Christian orthodoxy (1997.xi). Valantasis considers: ‘These divergent forms of Christianity open a large window into the theological discourse of the early church and their non-Christian neighbours … witnessing to the religious diversity of formative Christianity’ (1997.xii).

Dart finds there to be mocking laughter in the Gnostic myth making, something he notes stands: ‘in stark contrast to the near absence of laughter, mocking or otherwise, in the New Testament’ (1976. xxi). Dart asserts: ‘the mocking laughter of the Gnostics can be traced throughout the Nag Hammadi Library’. Whilst acknowledging this view is subjective, he nonetheless says: ‘the more Gnostic the text, the more audible the laughter’, considering: ‘the laughter serves as an answer for the ridicule of outsiders and as a way of supporting one another – laughing at the ignorant opposition’ (1976.133).

The nature of Gnostic laughter Dart divides into three categories which developed over time. Firstly, its bitter beginnings immersed in sarcasm, in which he cites: ‘The mocking Wisdom figure of Proverbs was seen as the laughing Sophia and the laughing Eve in the presumably early works such as *The Nature of the Archons*, *On the Origin of the World*, and *The Apocryphon of John'* (1976.133). Secondly, Dart suggests: 'it developed into the occasional periods of success that brings joy, whereby in this second stage, the figure of a laughing Jesus mocks his would-be persecutors from above the cross, but his mocking laughter is mixed “with joy.” In some texts, Jesus is described as laughing merrily with his disciples’ (1976.133). Thirdly, it developed as a result of the losing battles which invited the scorn of outsiders, for Dart says: ‘As Gnostic beliefs came under the heels of Christian orthodoxy, however, the Gnostics learned that mockery was a two-way street … not only by the disinterested doubter, but also by the mocking unbeliever’ (1976.133). Dart reports in *The Book of Thomas the*

Contender, Thomas implores Jesus “But these words that you speak to us are laughing-stocks to the world and sneered at, since they are misunderstood. So how can we go preach to them …?” (1976.133). For Gilhus, this alternative Gnostic Christianity established itself in opposition to Jewish, pagan and Christian traditions and thus used critical laughter, noting: ‘Because of the Gnostic's dualistic perspective, stressing the separation of spirit and matter, ... Christ was a messenger from the world above while Jesus was a material being. The doubling of roles was confusing and often comic’ (1997.71).

Rudolf Bultmann's commentary on John’s Gospel (1971) argues echoes of the Gnostic redeemer myth can be seen in the New Testament, with the Wisdom of Jewish literature and Gnostic myth becoming the personified “Word” in the prologue of John 1. 1-18, reflecting that Gnostic redeemer myth, and suggesting the author of John’s Gospel may have been a convert from a Gnostic sect. He also saw a Gnostic myth behind St. Paul’s allusion to a mysterious divine wisdom in 1 Corinthians 2.6, and in the “hymn” in Philippians 2. 6-11, which tells how Christ, a pre-existent divine being, left the celestial world to take on human form, that of a servant. Bultmann also described Proverbs 1. 23-33 as the: “most important passage … in which the whole myth is reflected” (also noted by Dart [1976.46, 48]), but whilst Bultmann’s theory has been largely discounted by subsequent scholars, Dart comments: ‘Wisdom is a saviour of sorts in Proverbs 1, but in the light of the writings in the Nag Hammadi library it is important to notice that she is also a “laughing saviour” (1976.48).

Dart asserts most Gnostics apparently believed that Jesus did not suffer on the cross, claiming that at the last moment, Jesus deceived his ignorant enemies, and laughed at their blindness. Two versions of this story are found within the Nag Hammadi texts, with this laughing Jesus seen as a successor to several mocking saviours encountered in other Gnostic texts (1976.107). By way of example, in the 'Gnostic' *Apocalypse of Peter* (which others would categorise as Docetic), the account and vision of Peter of the crucifixion depicts a scene where the living Christ, the risen saviour, stands beside the cross intended for him and laughs, whilst another man is nailed to the wood in his place. Peter says “What do I see, O Lord? Who is this above the tree (the cross), who is happy and laughs? Is it another whose feet and hands they are striking?” The Saviour replies “He whom you see above the tree, glad and laughing, is the living Jesus. But the one into whose hands and feet they drive the nails in his fleshly part, which is the substitute … one made in his likeness”. In this account the true Christ has long since parted from his earthly body, so after his transportation to heaven, he looks on and laughs as another man, a physical likeness, is being nailed bloodily to the

cross. He is gently amused at the blindness and folly of human beings, in that he could stage a cheap deception, whilst another, a pseudo-Jesus, is crucified instead. The account notes: “Because of this he laughs at their lack of perception, knowing that they are born blind” (1976.107). Dart quotes James Brashler’s view that the author: “disdainfully rejects those who cling to a dead man; i.e., the crucified physical Jesus, and presents the saviour as the revealer of life-giving *gnosis*” (1976.107).

The second Nag Hammadi text with a somewhat similar “laughing Jesus” crucifixion scene is to be found in *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, where the speaker, presumably Jesus, tells of the folly of his would-be executioners:

> It was not I whom they struck with the reed. It was another who lifted the cross onto his shoulders – Simon. It was another on whose head they placed the thorny crown. But I was up above, rejoicing over all the wealth of the archons and the offspring of the error of their empty glory. And I was laughing at their ignorance. (1976.108)

Dart tells us the *Great Seth* text also embodies a remarkable “laughing stock” section, which hints mockery might have been employed in some Gnostic liturgy. He relates how at one point the Creator God bellows: “I am God, and there is no other beside me”, a statement at which the narrator (later identified with Jesus Christ) reacts: “I laughed in joy when I examined his empty glory”. Dart comments:

> The Archon “was a laughing stock” not only because he said he was God and there was no other, but also because he was a jealous God who brought the sins of the fathers onto the sons for three and four generations. Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon, Moses, the twelve prophets, and John the Baptist were all “laughing stocks”, says the text in a series of seven recitations, all ending with a refrain stating the innocence of the readers. (1976.110)

Dart considers it fits the general attitude of *Great Seth* – one of disdain for the orthodox who worship a lesser God. However, he points out not all laughter in the Nag Hammadi texts is scornful, citing an episode in *The Apocryphon of John* where Jesus, reacting to a question from John, first “laughed” before giving his reply. Similarly in *The Sophia of Jesus Christ*, Jesus greets his disciples by saying “Peace”, but their reaction seems to indicate they are afraid and perplexed, whereupon “The Saviour laughed and said to them, ‘What are you thinking about? What is perplexing you?’ ” (1976.111).

Another Nag Hammadi text which touches upon the crucifixion is found in *The First Apocalypse of James,* relating a discussion between James the Just and Jesus, both before and after the crucifixion of Jesus, who, it says, did not really suffer but only appeared to (1976.138). We owe to Irenaeus knowledge of some of the now lost writings regarding the crucifixion from the hand of Basilides, who is said to have composed both a psalm book and a gospel. From Basilides' story Irenaeus recounts:

> He did not suffer, but a certain Simon of Cyrene was compelled to carry his cross for him, and this (Simon) was transformed by him (Jesus) so that he was thought to be Jesus himself, and was crucified through ignorance and error. Jesus, however, took on the form of Simon, and stood by laughing at them. (1976.108, 109)

This laughter depicted in these accounts is similar to the derisive, mocking and superior laughter already noted in some of the Psalms, and particularly pertinent here is Psalm 2, which tells of the rulers (Gnosticism's archons) conspiring "against the Lord and his Anointed" (Davidic King), continuing "He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord has them in derision", a sentiment also similarly found in Psalm 59. Freke and Gandy also note in some versions of the Gnostic Jesus myths, it is not the 'real' Jesus who is crucified, but only his *eidolon* (or image) (2005.160). They tell us the Gnostic Christians did not teach that believing in the historical death and resurrection of Jesus would save us from Hell when we die. According to the Gnostics, we are already dead and living in Hell right now. For the Gnostics, Heaven and Hell are not places we go when the body dies, but are two ways of experiencing the life drama (2005.158).

Kuschel thinks for the Gnostics, it was quite incompatible with the divinity of this saviour that he should die an utterly human death ... and that a substitute had to suffer the shameful death in his place. It is the figure of Simon of Cyrene who plays the decisive substitute role. This notion of the Gnostics is confirmed and summarised by Irenaeus in *Against the Heresies* (I.24.4), and also in another Gnostic work *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, where this Christ says: 'But I was rejoicing in the height...and I was laughing at their ignorance' (*The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. J. M. Robinson, 1977.332) (1994.66, 67). So *Gnosticism* has its laughing saviour, but this laughter does not make this saviour any more human, since, as Kuschel notes:

> He remains the superior heavenly being, the one who is divinely exalted, who may not exhaust the full depth of humanity (including suffering). Moreover the laughter of the Gnostic saviour is strictly speaking not human laughter ... [but] a

> laughter of divine superiority and mockery. So the saviour's laughter does not humanize him but intensifies his 'docetic' character, which prevents the saviour as a human being from really sharing all the consequences of humanity. (1994.68)

As such, we need to question whether the laughter of such a 'Gnostic' saviour offers humanity the comfort of any 'words against death'. I fear not! For this I suggest we need Christianity's incarnate Saviour: 'bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh' to teach and encourage us to laugh with him in the face of death. It is little wonder those early orthodox Christian theologians found the Gnostic writings and beliefs to be laughable, and accordingly mocked them. It is regrettable none of that laughter evident in the arguments and debates taking place during that era spilled over into the Christian writings and Christian witness of that age when compared to that evident amongst their Gnostic counterparts.

Looking for laughter within a wider context of material from the period covered by the Gnostic texts, Kuschel points out in the apocryphal *Infancy Gospel of James*, Mary, still pregnant, is depicted as a weeping yet also a laughing mother (1994.70); moreover the *Fourth Eclogue* of the Roman poet Virgil (70-19 BCE) says there is mention of a child of God whose birth similarly ushers in a new age. This new-born child laughs, and in doing so betrays 'his supernatural descent' (1994.71). He mentions too that in the apocryphal *Pseudo Gospel of Matthew*, the newborn Jesus is said to have 'laughed' and 'smiled with the most sweet smile', and that Zoroaster, founder of the Persian Zoroastrian cult, is also reported to have laughed on the day of his birth (1994.71). Kuschel finds similar parallels with some fairy tales and folk-songs depicting: 'laughter as an expression of fertility, of the fullness of life, of resistance against death … [suggesting that] laughter from the fullness of life can at the same time be understood as laughter against all that is contrary to life' (1994.71). What is contrary to life is, of course, death, and accordingly can be seen as a 'word against death'.

For Christians believing Jesus came that we might have life in all its fullness, and to give hope and resistance to the idea of any ultimate victory being won by death itself (death being clearly contrary to life), not only are joy and laughter appropriate, but they must surely qualify as 'words against death' according to Douglas Davies' definition, with laughter here seen as an expression of resistance to death. However, I would qualify this further by saying that during the course of these chapters we have seen that whilst laughter can be an expression of many different types of emotions, only in specific circumstances can it qualify as such a 'word against death'.

Reading the New Testament books, we find no such picture of the so-called Gnostics 'laughing saviour', and whilst we read nothing of Jesus laughing, neither in the Gospels do we see him denouncing laughter and joy (as many of his later followers would). Dart notes a serious tone prevails in the Gospels and other New Testament writings, where it would appear the Gospel writers and others did not wish to risk the connotations that laughter can assume, with mockery in some cases, and frivolity in others. This may of course be a direct consequence of the attitude and writings of the Gnostics. He suggests: ‘If Jesus’ humanity is an important part of orthodox Christianity, would not a smiling or laughing Jesus have contributed to his humanness?’ (1976.111). Here I have to agree with him wholeheartedly.

Dart notes the jovial Jesus of the Gnostics was less human than the New Testament versions, since the Gnostics generally held a “docetic” view in respect of Jesus, most believing that he did not really suffer on the cross, and therefore did not need to be raised from the dead, and for many the body was regarded as a mere garment, and accordingly of little consequence (1976.111). This concurs in many ways with the Hindu understanding and philosophy regarding death and the unimportance of the physical remains after death once it is perceived the soul of the deceased has departed. But according to Dart there was an orthodox minority within Gnosticism who affirmed Jesus’ human qualities and his physical suffering on the cross, as can be found and discerned in the tract *Melchizedek*, which tells of: ‘the encounter of “Jesus Christ, the Son of God” with hostile powers who will initiate false charges against him’ (1976. 111). The Gnostic texts certainly contain considerably more laughter than either the Old or New Testaments, but do not provide us with any clear guidance in establishing a Christian theology of laughter, nor many instances of the use of laughter as a ‘word against death’.

Summary of Conclusions to be drawn after Examination of the Biblical and Gnostic writings

Looking at the whole expanse of the biblical writings reviewed here, I conclude the Bible only partly gives any direct evidence for developing an understanding of a Christian theology of laughter, and the function of laughter as a ‘word against death’. Whilst the Old Testament gives a more direct source for evidence concerning laughter within the texts, providing more quantitive material where some humour and laughter is apparent, in constructing a Christian theology of laughter I consider there is more qualitative material hidden within the New Testament Gospel texts. Much of the laughter presented in the Old Testament is of a derisive, mocking, and superior nature,

which I believe can and has been explained and justified within the overall project, but perhaps not all that might be hoped for and expected in developing a Christian theology of laughter, certainly from both Cote and Kuschel's viewpoint. I have particularly mentioned the episodes in Genesis, 1 and 2 Kings, Job, Jonah, Ecclesiastes and the Psalms, because it seems to me that this particular material, more than any other writings, contributes to my thesis that the laughter presented there can justify interpretation as a 'word against death'. Importantly the Abraham/Sarah episode indicates that the more positive laughter presented there can be discerned as the means of addressing a very *difficult* situation. I suggest this more hopeful and positive laughter can begin to help establish a theology of laughter, and one which may also be seen in the light of the concept of its use as 'words against death', but the evidence is somewhat limited, and the laughter restrictive.

However, I would argue by analysing the New Testament writings for humour and laughter in a way that does not just view the text at initial face value, but searches for that deeper, hidden evidence and clues for laughter and humour behind the text, this has enabled us to discern something of that more positive laughter and humour which I believe underlies much of the teaching ministry of Jesus, particularly as presented in the parables, and enables us to suggest that a Christian theology of laughter is not only possible, but desirable. Jesus' dealings with others outside God's original covenant with Israel (as expressed in the Judaism of his time), such as the Canaanite woman near Tyre and Sidon, and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, show his great insights and sense of humour, indicating to me that in his life and ministry laughter would not be unknown or unexpected. Episodes such as the wedding feast at Cana, or the feast which followed on from the call of Matthew (Levi) to discipleship, or the hospitality given after the restoration and rehabilitation of Zacchaeus in Jericho, or hospitality given at the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus in Bethany, all indicate to me that joy and laughter would have been an appropriate response employed in each of these particular situations.

Even Jesus' clashes with the various religious and secular authority figures on various occasions during his ministry as presented by the Gospel accounts, were usually turned to his advantage by the humour of his wit, irony, and gracious sarcasm. This is seen too in those final events which followed on the episode of raising Lazurus from the dead, bringing into play the final culmination of his earthly life, and I would argue we also see this intimated both in his appearances before the Jewish authorities and also with the soldiers and officials they sent to arrest him in Gethsemane, and including his dialogue with the Roman Governor Pilate. In all of these instances Jesus shows a

certain amount of humour in the irony and sarcasm he used as a defence, and indeed as a judgement on those who variously sought to criticize, entrap, or condemn either him or his disciples, as presented to us by the Gospel writers.

Throughout each of the Gospel accounts, there would clearly appear to be an overall impression of Jesus having a great sense of joy in his relationship with God as his Heavenly Father, and something which extended to all creatures and creation. Indeed, this is shown especially in his love and concern for humanity in general, and more particularly in his dealings with the sick, the poor, the dispossessed, and with the various 'sinners' he encountered and rehabilitated, a joy and *joi de vivre* where it seems laughter would inevitably have been present, and yet again no mention is made of it. This joy appears to emanate quite naturally from him when we read the Gospel accounts of his life and ministry. We see joy quite clearly in the New Testament writings, but whilst joy does not necessarily lead to laughter, I feel certain this laughter of Jesus must have been truly apparent in his life and ministry in many of the episodes presented to us by the Gospel writers, which have been examined in the course of these last chapters.

Interestingly, in marked contrast we have discovered and noted here the Gnostic writings and texts show abundant evidence for humour and laughter, and a greater sense of *joi de vivre* on the part of the Gnostics themselves. Some writings clearly mock orthodox Christianity, yet others both mock and downgrade and belittle the God of Judaism, and even present us with a mocking Jesus figure who both outwits and laughs at those seeking to kill him. Here the similarities and parallels to be found in the apparent rape of Eve texts (only mentioned previously, above), where in both cases be it Jesus or Eve, it is a substitute who suffers and endures all that the wicked would do to them, whilst in both instances the laughing Jesus and the laughing Eve look on with derision and mockery at the stupidity of their hoodwinked opponents. But whilst the Gnostic Jesus may laugh at his escape in a way that is clearly a 'word against death', that laughter proves no help to the substitute being crucified in his place, for whom this is certainly no effective 'word against death' at all. But as we have seen, the Gnostics who mocked their opponents were in their turn mocked by the gradually self-defining orthodox Christians, who found so many of the beliefs of their Gnostic counterparts as expounded in the Gnostic texts quite laughable.

It has been necessary to look at the biblical writings in some detail in seeking to develop a Christian theology of laughter, because in looking at Jesus and his background in search of that laughter, they are the foundation documents for all

Christian thinking about laughter and death, albeit, often later sharpened against the wet-stone of Gnosticism and its beliefs. In subsequent chapters we need to extend this to the centuries of Christian tradition, to see how Christian thinking about laughter and death has evolved, and how that thinking is found embedded in a response to the culture of its time. Such evidence and encouragement for Christian laughter I believe we have found within the New Testament, gives us a surer foundation which will now be further developed in the following chapters, which begins with a brief review of the earlier Christian condemnation and negativity towards laughter as found in the writings of early theologians, before looking at some evidence for its survival and role in Medieval Church life, and its gradual rehabilitation through the insights and writings of the Renaissance scholars, particularly Erasmus and Rabelais.

CHAPTER FOUR: A BRIEF HISTORY OF LAUGHTER IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH FROM THE ‘FATHERS’ TO THE RENAISSANCE AND REFORMATION ERA

The background to the history of laughter and its role within the Christian church is relevant in providing a picture of how laughter has been perceived, controlled, and used over the past two millennia. The New Testament Gospel accounts make no mention of Jesus ever laughing, so we have an apparent 'missing link' from the Gospels and New Testament writings, resulting with the development of a tradition of denouncing laughter within Christianity. In this chapter I seek to trace this 'missing link' and changing attitudes towards laughter in the early Church, following this through to the Renaissance and Reformation era, in order to advance my thesis that laughter is an ongoing and enduring component in the life of the Church, an 'appropriate expression of life-affirming well being', of particular relevance in the ongoing mission and witness of the Church today.

When considering evidence for the discouragement of laughter in the early Church, particularly within monasticism, the lives and writings of the early Church Fathers are paramount, enabling us to see how the Church developed its self-consciousness as the serious vehicle for Christian propagation of the truth. In looking for negative attitudes condemning laughter, I focus upon the lives and writings of certain individuals, Evagrius Pontus (a desert Father in Egypt), John Climacus (Abbot of Mount Sinai), the sermons

of St John Chrysostom (the 'golden mouthed' Patriarch of Constantinople), and St Augustine (Bishop of Hippo, 354-430 CE). I suggest that negativity towards laughter discerned from within ascetic monastic circles, can, to a certain extent, be moderated and challenged in the lives, witness and behaviour of the phenomenon of the 'holy fools', individuals who emerged during that early patristic period from the same monastic background, and who, I suggest, contradict some negative attitudes of their more restrained and earnest contemporaries. This leads me to suggest that laughter has never been completely vanquished within Christian circles and wider Church through the Christian centuries.

Gilhus asserts: 'While the Greek philosophers laid the cornerstone of a laughter theory, the Christian Church Fathers made laughter a subject of theology', citing Clement of Alexandria as an early Christian thinker to consider laughter and its place, where in *Paidagogos* (2. 46) he devoted a special discussion to laughter, demanding even smiling be kept under control and subject to discipline (1997.61). Stephen Halliwell (2008) considers Clement was steeped in Greek philosophy and literature, a conceptual and cultural framework he adapted and revised to mould a new model of Christian ethics, focusing on lifestyle and personal conduct, treating the propensity to laugh as symptomatic of bad character (2008.484, 485). Halliwell highlights the paradox in Clement calling laughter itself laughable, that it is ostentatious laughter Clement is keen to exclude from Christian life (2008.485, 486), but that Clement's goal is restriction, not elimination (2008.489). Gilhus thinks Clement's ambition was not to quench laughter completely, but to regulate it; his uneasiness being in accordance with the Stoic ideal of late antiquity, where reason ought to conquer emotions, and excessive laughter reveals weakness of character, destroying discipline (1997.61, 62). Gilhus considers: 'Whether in the East or the West, the learned men of the early Church – such as Ambrose, Jerome, Basil, Pseudo-Cyprian and John Chrysostom – are unanimous in their hostility toward laughter' (1997.62). My own analysis suggests a more nuanced and moderate conclusion; however, she suggests laughter attained a new religious significance as a symbol of what must be shunned by those whose power derived from religious virtuosity, which, paradoxically, acquired symbolic value from its absence rather than its presence (1997.62). I suggest laughter was never far or entirely absent from Church circles.

Judith Perkins (1995) thinks: ‘Christian narrative representation in the early empire worked to create a new kind of human self-understanding – the perception of self as sufferer’ (1995. Preface). Drawing on feminist and social theory, she addresses the question why themes of martyrdom and bodily suffering were so prevalent in early

Christian texts, seeing these as paralleling the suffering heroines in Greek novels and in martyr acts. If Perkins' analysis of the culture is correct, it is little wonder laughter is mostly absent in the New Testament writings, and none recorded emanating from the lips of Jesus. With this mind-set of the 'self as sufferer' prevailing in the wider culture at this critical time when the Gospels were written, leading into the patristic period when Church teachings and doctrines were developed, it seems little wonder how a Christian condemnation of laughter would seem quite plausible, and not entirely unexpected. Her thesis could explain much, especially of an era when the Church faced widespread persecution and martyrdom.

David Knowles in his introduction to Augustine's *The City Of God* (1972, rep. 1977), points out that Augustine was born during an epoch of great importance and distinction for the Christian Church, which had seen the prestigious development of monasticism in Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Asia Minor, and the birth of great theologians, who were to become the Fathers of the Church in this golden age of patristic theology. Amongst these he lists Basil the Great, Gregory Nazianzen (Gregory of Nazianzus), Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, Jerome, all born between 329 (Basil) and 354 (Augustine). They were therefore children of the first and second generation to attain maturity after the Empire had become officially Christian following the conversion of Constantine (312), and transference of the seat of Empire from Rome to Constantinople (330) (1977.vii). It is to the lives and writings of early theologians of this patristic period to which we now turn our attention.

Evagrius Ponticus, John Climacus, and the Desert Fathers

Evagrius Ponticus was born in 345CE in Ibora near Pontus, Asia Minor, studied in Neocaesarea, and became a highly educated classical scholar. Under the influence of Basil of Caesarea, Evagrius was ordained a lector by Basil the Great, subsequently (c.380CE) ordained deacon, and then appointed archdeacon in Constantinople by Gregory of Nazianzus, in which capacity Evagrius was present at the Second Ecumenical Council in 381CE. Having fallen in love with a married woman, and suffering an emotional and physical breakdown, Evagrius fled to Jerusalem, where Melania the Elder persuaded him to take up the monastic life in Egypt, where he subsequently became a Christian monk and ascetic (see David Brakke, 2009.3). Evagrius became a leading spiritual guide amongst the monks in the Egyptian desert in the fourth century, where his work recorded and systematized the oral teaching of the Desert Fathers, teaching amongst others John Cassius and Palladius.

Robert Sinkewicz (2003) considers Evagrius: 'formulated a systematic presentation of the ascetic teaching of the semi-eremitic monks of these settlements, setting them within a theological framework that drew heavily on the third-century Alexandrian tradition of Clement and Origen', which profoundly influenced subsequent Byzantine monastic teaching (2003. back cover). A.M.Casiday (2006) sees Evagrius as: 'the teacher of prayer par excellence for the Greek Christian tradition, … [and as] an invaluable primary source for the theology of the desert', providing first-hand evidence of how the theology of the desert Fathers could be (2006.2). Through correspondence with contemporaries, Evagrius kept involved in intellectual exchanges that were to prove foundational for the development of Byzantine spirituality, shedding light on the golden age of patristic literature, and influencing the later development of the spiritual life of the Latin Middle Ages (2006.3).

Casiday considers the foundations of Evagrian theology are edifying dialogue, and the habit of moral reform, both facilitating communion with God (2006.7), his reading of scripture Christocentric, employing a Cappadocian perspective regarding Nicene theology, displaying an outspoken apologetic for Nicene orthodoxy (2006.12). An avid student of Origen of Alexandria, Evagrius highlighted the dangers of impulses arising from the body: “according to the desires of the flesh”, which the soul can either bring under control, or allow to develop into sin (*On First Principles 3.2.4*) (Brakke 2009.25). Brakke's work deals with the monks' combat with demons, a contest against vice for virtue, purity of heart, thus for salvation, exhorting the Christian to a higher moral life, against what Evagrius perceived as spiritual warfare with the demonic.

Dying on Epiphany in 399 or 400CE, Evagrius vanishes from historical record, but his name subsequently became embroiled in controversy over Origen raised by Theophilus of Alexandria, being implicated by Jerome, who claimed Evagrius' spiritual counsels were untenable because they attempted to eliminate a constitutive element of human life - emotions, alleging Evagrius' theological anthropology was skewed (Casiday 2006.16, 17). Casiday criticises John Climacus for disowning Evagrius: 'even as he propagates so much of Evagrius' ascetic theory' (2006.22).

From his writings, it appears Evagrius took an austere and serious disposition in his monastic life and teachings, with humour and laughter generally regarded as inappropriate. Brakke considers Evagrius’ teaching stands in the Christian tradition which appropriates Stoic ideas, whereby the monk must, like the Stoic sage, exercise discernment in sorting the thoughts and images that confront him (2009.25). The influence of Stoic ideas and philosophy can be traced in the Greek concept of

apatheia, which the Stoics considered the highest condition of humanity, a state of mind which signified a desirable state of indifference, denoting freedom from all passions and emotional disturbance (http://www.the-difference-between.com/apathy/apatheia). From *apatheia* we derive both 'apathy' and 'apathetic', where in contemporary usage, apathy may be defined as without feeling, and apathetic as indicating an unemotional indifference. However, this is not how *apatheia* was understood by Evagrius and other early Church theologians, who saw it in a more positive light. Kallistos Ware on *apatheia* in *SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* records: 'For such writers, … it is not the absence of all feeling, but a state of reintegration and spiritual freedom conferred by divine grace' (1988.19); where applied to God, *apatheia* denotes an absence of passion, whereas in human persons, it represents mastery over the passions (1988.18).

From its origins in Stoic philosophy, the passions were regarded as 'diseases' of the soul that are unnatural and intrinsically evil. First employed within a Christian context by Justin, Ware relates that it became a technical term which Clement of Alexandria adopted and used regularly, as one who considered the truly good man as having no passions, with John Climacus (in *Ladder* 26) insisting that God is not the creator of passions, and for whom *apatheia* comes close to meaning their elimination (1988.19). Ware considers for Evagrius it holds a central place within the Christian life, constituting the final aim of *praktike*, the 'active life', but suggests the precise meaning depends upon the sense its author gives to *pathos* ('passion'), some Greek Fathers following Aristotle in regarding the passions as natural impulses, neither good nor bad in themselves, but a necessary and useful part of human nature (1988.19). When commended as an ideal, *apatheia* means only the redirection of the passions, not their total elimination (1988.19). Like Brakke, Ware considers Evagrius favours a Stoic view of passion, suggesting: '*apatheia* is not wholly negative, for he links it closely with *agape*: it is not apathy in the modern sense of the word indifference, insensitivity … but it is the replacement of lust by love; not the suppression of desire but its purification. Ware asserts St. John Cassian, translating Evagrius' teaching to the Latin West, translates *apatheia* as 'purity of heart' (1988.19). In stressing its dynamic character, Ware reports Diadoclus speaks of: 'the fire of *apatheia*', and John Climacus (in *Ladder* 29) terms it: 'resurrection of the soul prior to that of the body' (1988.19).

For desert theologians, *apatheia* seems a positive state of mind to aspire to, far removed from contemporary understanding of impassionate apathetic indifference. Embracing the Stoic ideal of a life without pathos and suffering, indicates for many early monastics the desirability of remaining indifferent to the vicissitudes of fortune,

and to pleasure and pain which was important. The remoteness of their location enabled them to steer a line through life where one could avoid being moved emotionally, and rise above such things. From this perspective, one can understand why joy, laughter, humour and frivolity were things which such austere souls might wish to avoid, and may shed light further on Evagrius' likely attitude.

G.Y. Glazor and K. Corrigan (2009) note how Evagrius' emphasis upon impassibility and purity of heart resembles Gregory's view, with Evagrius advocating the solitary life only for those who have experienced community life successfully (Eul 29), and that Evagrius' view of retreat, separation and the monastic life is well balanced and in tune with Basil's rules, especially insistence upon manual work and compassion. Unlike Basil, who appears to reject laughter as an appropriate expression of joy (*Shorter Rules* 31 R 35, Silvas 292): 'Evagrius commends cheerfulness and accessibility in the tradition of Mararius of Alexandria' (2009.66). Whilst Evagrius makes little mention of laughter in his work, a few are recorded in Sinkewicz's (2003) translation. In his *Eulogios* 23.24, Evagrius is warning his fellow monks about the demon of vainglory, advising: 'when works are absent, words do not flash forth with the power of works. (They are no more than) a complaint of grey-haired men, a youthful word and bragging lips trembling with laughter' (2003.51). Laughter here is used descriptively, not in condemnation.

Eight Thoughts 2.8 warns about fornication and the temptations of women: 'A third time, they look directly at you without shame, you smile, and they laugh heartily' (2003.76), and in *Monks/Virgin* 46: 'She who draws forth a man's words in laughter is like one who puts a noose around her own neck' (2003.134). Women feature again in *Letter* 16 (G2.66-7): 'the demon of fornication guards its boundaries to see whether the monk who encounters a woman did so out of necessity or fabricated a reasonable excuse, or if he pronounced a work that provoked laughter or that invited an apparent reverence' (2003.255). I suggest these warnings are descriptive rather than condemnatory of laughter. In *Monks/Virgin* 22 Evagrius is more explicitly condemnatory: 'Laughter is shameful and shamelessness is disgraceful; every foolish person becomes involved in such things' (2003.133), and in *Exhortations* 1.10 notes: 'Uncontrolled laughter destroys a restrained character' (2003.218). The monk was supposed to be restrained in his manner of life, but Evagrius admits to lapses through human weakness and frailty suggesting: 'every foolish person becomes involved in such things', which I take to be part of the human condition, not intended to be entirely negative. Evagrius is aware the monks' way of life is both mundane and hard, with

temptations to give up. In *Exhortations* 2.16 he encourages perseverance and stability, warning:

> Just as the man who has started out to walk the road, if he does not complete the journey but stops midway on the road becomes the laughing stock and falls short of both goals, namely, the one he had set out from and the one towards which he started, so the one who has begun to proceed by the divine law, if he does not complete the course, because he has become reprobate and overcome with laughter, will be deprived of eternal life. (2003.220)

Evagrius assumes those who leave the monastic community and rule will be the laughing stock of their former companions, which does not indicate condemnation of laughter as such, although reprobate laughter is frowned upon, giving some further indication/evidence that for Evagrius, humour and laughter may in some circumstances not be entirely ruled out.

Julia Komstantinovsky (2009) asserts: ‘Evagrius taught that tears were the utmost sign of true repentance, and that weeping, even for days at a time, opened one up to God’ (2009.19). But, for all his austerity, the Coptic *Life of Evagrius* reports the weekly gatherings on Saturday nights through to Sunday's communal worship offered other monks opportunity to consult Evagrius about their struggles with demonic thoughts: ‘listening to his words of encouragement until sunrise. And thus they would leave rejoicing and glorifying God, for Evagrius’s teaching was very sweet’ (Coptic *Life of Evagrius* 17; in *Four Desert Fathers*, trans. Vivian & Green, 2004.84, 85).

Further insight into the attitudes and practices of the desert Fathers is produced by Hannah Hunt's article (2013) *The Monk as Mourner,* highlighting that the Eastern Christian term for a monastic from the desert Fathers was ‘mourner’, where the solitary grieved for his sin, and expressed penitence in tears of lamentation, described as: 'a joy-bearing grief'. Paradoxically, the remorse felt was joyful because it brought the monk closer to God. Hunt states: 'The ‘mourner’ within the Christian community articulated the remorse of his fellows as well as himself. The term was applied to men specifically, and denotes a shift from the practice of secular mourning being the province of women' (http://brepols.metapress.com/content/q3768781140u672k/).

Hunt explores male self-identity in two very different contemporary seventh-century monks. Here I focus on John Climacus (“Klimakos” in Hunt's 2004 work, but here as

Climacus), Abbot (late sixth century) of St Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, whose *Ladder of Divine Ascent* remains the Lenten reading in every Orthodox Monastery.

Climacus' writings express knowledge and understanding of the temptations and demands of the secular life, outlining mourning for sin in a way accessible to his fellow monastics and also those living outside of the monastery. Developing the theme of her earlier work (2004), Hunt considers the Desert Monastic Tradition (which Climacus exemplifies) gives insights into the mindset of Climacus and his monastic predecessors and contemporaries (like Evagrius). Hunt highlights the concept of *penthos* expounded by Climacus in his work (drawn from Greek words for compunction, yearning, and grief, yet distinct from other types of melancholy), seeing this as a process, not a static condition, whereby the monk's grief for sin may be variously described as mourning, weeping, compunction, or remorse – a heartfelt sorrow, expressed by actual tears or a desire to weep, and seen as expressive of the mystery of divine participation (2004.3). Such grief is never despair, self-pity, or mourning for human losses, for Hunt suggests: 'It thus occupies a unique position in the crux between body and soul. It is the purified passion experienced by the penitent who, through pricking of conscience, accepts his or her need to repent, in order to be restored to God' (2004.3). But in this *penthos* practised by those early desert Fathers, there remains a disguised and unrecognised element of joy and laughter.

In Step 7 of *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Climacus describes the process of spiritual growth and spiritual progression, defining *penthos* as: 'the golden spur in a soul stripped naked of all attachments and possessions', and: 'the soul's grief, a spur in a purified soul' (Step 7.1). *Penthos* is described as: ‘the sorrow of a soul on fire’ (Step 7.52), and: ‘pain of a repentant soul’ (Step 7.60), a mourning not for something which has been lost (Step 7.59), but expressing a yearning for something anxiously sought (2004.75, 76). *Penthos* is seen as the remorseful consciousness of the penitent soul which drives it towards God, opening the possibility of rejoicing in God's saving mercy (2004.78), focusing on God's love, and outlining how to travel from falleness to perfection (2004.81). Climacus continues the argument on the source and results of the vices and virtues eloquently set out by Evagrius (see Hunt, 2004.70), defining a monk as: 'a mourning soul that both asleep and awake is increasingly occupied with the remembrance of death', whilst advocating frequenting the tombs of the dead in order to remind oneself of death (2004.71). Such remembrance is intended to cast the mourner upon God's providence, prompting repentance of sins, with fear of the Day of Judgement expressed by tears and mourning leading towards spiritual growth (2004.71).

Hunt translates Step 7 as 'Concerning joy-inducing mourning', noting that whilst mourning is strongly connected to fear of death and judgement, it appears a more natural companion of fear than joy, with fear more naturally seen as a renunciation of laughter (2004.74). However, positive benefits are seen, for Climacus teaches holy fear can lead to holy joy: 'Tears shed from fear intercede for us; but tears of all-holy love show that our prayer has been accepted', enhancing awareness of God's mercies. The mourner will find spiritual joy, whereby: 'He who is clothed in blessed and graciously-given mourning, as in a bridal gown, knows the spiritual laughter of the soul' (2004.74), which itself leads to joy and holy love, knowing they are moving closer to God (2004.74). Whilst Climacus considers mourning is generally incompatible with laughter (Step 7.8, 24, 29, 30, 38, 44, 54, 60), he sees *penthos* as just such a bridal gown (albeit representing both gain and loss), leading to: 'spiritual laughter of the soul … the joyful overflowing of the pure heart in adoration of God' (Step 7.40) (2004.76, 77). In both Step 7 and Scholia 5 there are references to spiritual laughter, of the pure soul being clothed in the 'bridal garments' of 'blessed and graciously-given mourning' (Step 7.40), this nuptial imagery suggesting ultimate restoration of union with the Godhead, and intimating the innocence of God's original creation (Adam before the Fall) (2004.86). Such 'spiritual laughter of the soul' is contrasted with the laughter of more earthly pleasure, such as attends gossip, loquacity and frivolity, against which, Hunt suggests, the desert Fathers were very fixed (2004.77).

Hunt's work on Climacus provides useful insights into the mind-set of the early desert Fathers, and their aspiration to achieve that 'spiritual laughter of the soul' which Climacus perceives as the ultimate treasure to be achieved prior to death, and what he anticipates as the future ultimate vision of God revealed in Christ's resurrection.

John Chrysostom

Stephen Halliwell devotes an extensive section to Chrysostom (2008.495-512), about how Chrysostom preaches: 'on the acute perils of laughter to a socially mixed Christian audience both in his home town of Antioch, ... and then, as its patriarch, in the imperial capital Constantinople' (2008.495). He suggests for Chrysostom, laughter signifies: 'a fault-line in human nature: its almost incorrigible attachment to the body, its immersion in the present, and its addiction to the thrills of gratification' (2008.495), that Christians are: 'at war with the (devil's) world', with laughter seen as: 'a polluter of both language and action: it is both fed by and a feeder of shameless immorality' (2008.497,498).

M. Conrad Hyers (1987) highlights a sermon against laughter and playfulness, which Chrysostom saw as too close to paganism, and too far from Christian decorum and devotion. Preaching in 390CE, Chrysostom proclaimed: 'This world is not a theatre, in which we can laugh, and we are not assembled together in order to burst into peals of laughter, but to weep for our sins ... It is not God who gives us the chance to play, but the devil'. Other examples from sermons illustrate his hard-hitting approach to laughter and luxury, as in a sermon entitled *Against the circuses and the theatre* (see section 272, http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/chrysostom_against_theatres_and_circuses.htm). In another sermon, Chrysostom begins by denouncing laughter as inappropriate in the Church's liturgy and Christian discipline, but subsequently acknowledges the inbuilt role of laughter (http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/240215.htm).

Gilhus (drawing on Resnick 1987.96,97) asserts Chrysostom was the first to point out Jesus never laughed, stressing instead that Jesus wept twice, once when he beheld Jerusalem, and again before Lazarus was raised from the dead, suggesting: ‘John Chrysostom found mourning most suitable on earth, considering the state of the present world. In connection with the life and suffering of Christ he repeatedly and rhetorically asks his audience 'dost thou laugh?'' (*Homilies on Hebrews*, XV) (1997.62). Chrysostom stresses the thought of the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross ought to quench all laughter once and for all (1997.63), Halliwell commenting: 'It is as if laughter as such was irredeemably tainted by those acts of mockery, and thus made forever unavailable to a Christian life' (2008.498). Gilhus considers Chrysostom aimed his criticism at the excess of laughter, beyond measure and out of control, giving the impression in his homilies there is something profoundly suspicious about laughter (1997.62).

Chrysostom's sermons illustrate the opinion (held in common with various leaders of the Church of that era), that laughter challenged virtue and led to laxity, and indicated levity, whereas Chrysostom, with his monastic background, considered the devout life implied that you cannot find satisfaction in this life, only in the life of the world to come. Gilhus notes: 'laughter was now conceived of as undermining the very foundations of the ascetic life from which the Christian Church was nourished' (1997.63). Karl-Josef Kuschel considers Chrysostom seemed concerned with condemning only the extreme form of laughter – like Plato and Aristotle (regarded as the great ethicists of virtue in antiquity) (1994.47). For Chrysostom (echoing Climacus), it is weeping and not laughter that binds a person to God, Kuschel explaining: 'The reason for this is unambiguous: weeping alone unites with God, while laughter leads a person away from God, alienates Christians from their Creator. The model is Christ himself, who was

often seen to weep but never to laugh' (1994.47). Kuschel suggests this Christian archetype of thought has deep roots within the early Church with its clear Hellenistic stamp, and left a deep mark on the Middle Ages, above all within monasticism, asserting: '*Indeed in the Middle Ages there was no theology of laughter, but there was a theology of tears'* (1994.47; author's italics).

Kuschel considers in John Chrysostom's writings there is an identification of laughter and vanity, laughter and the forgetfulness of sins, laughter and remoteness from God, something which was to have a powerful effect in history (1994.48). Gilhus considers Chrysostom: 'aimed his criticism at the excess of laughter, laughter beyond measure and out of control' (1997.62), where laughter might challenge virtue and lead to laxity, and: 'conceived of as undermining the very foundations of the ascetic life from which the Christian Church was nourished' (1997.63).

Augustine of Hippo

Augustine's conversion and autobiographical writings in the *Confessions* indicate his positive view of creation, with human beings acknowledged as made in the image of God, thus strongly suggesting human laughter is intrinsically good within God's good purposes, and to be expected as an enduring feature of human beings, which I believe counteracts the view that Augustine was an ultra-serious theologian of earlier times. This is an important point to note when assessing Augustine's potential attitude towards laughter and humour, especially in *City of God.* The main point I highlight is that where Augustine champions a good creation by a good God, the implication is that human beings (in their full humanity made in the image of God) are to be championed, too, which implies that laughter and humour must be part of this goodness and gift and character of God.

In *City of God* Book XI.21 Augustine draws upon the Genesis account of creation, emphasizing: 'God saw that it was good', and rejoicing in the created world (1977 Pelican translation.451). Augustine asserts: 'God comprehends all (this) in a stable and eternal present', drawing upon James 1.17 to emphasize that God's knowledge has no change or variation, noting how Plato observed 'the invisible realities of God' presented to the mind by means of his creation (1977.452, 453). In Book XI.22 Augustine touches upon the hidden purpose of divine providence within creation, whose obscurity of purpose he thinks may serve to exercise our humility or undermine our pride, asserting: 'there is no such entity in nature as "evil"; "evil" is merely a name for the privation of good', not contrary to: 'God's good purpose to create good' (1977.454). This contradicts

the beliefs of Manicheans and others who imagine there is some evil in nature, some: 'adverse first cause' resulting in defilement and pollution which needs to be overcome (1977.454).

In Book XI.23 Augustine criticizes and contradicts those who suggest: 'the reason for the world's creation' was to restrain evil, not to establish good, reproaching Origen's notion (set out in *Peri Archon, Concerning First Principles*), stating: 'there is only one cause for the creation of the world – the purpose of God's goodness in the creation for good', asserting that the three basic questions to ask in respect of created things, and their inevitable answers, are: 'Who made it?' 'God'; 'How?' 'Through his word'; 'Why?' 'Because it is good' (1977.457). In Book XI.24 Augustine considers the divine Trinity in creation, asserting: 'the goodness of the created work follows the act of creation in order to emphasize that the work corresponded with the goodness which was the reason for its creation', whereby: 'the whole united Trinity is revealed to us in its works' (1977.457).

It seems to me Augustine in his writings does not display such negativity towards laughter and humour we find in Chrysostom's sermons evidenced earlier. In his *Confessions* he relates details of his earlier life, mentioning laughter on a number of occasions, but in a matter-of-fact non-judgmental way, focusing rather on God's grace and forbearance towards him during his wayward period before his conversion to Christianity. In *Confessions* Book I.8 he relates: 'Afterward I began to laugh - at first in my sleep, then when waking. For this I have been told about myself and I believe it - though I cannot remember it - for I see the same things in other infants'. In I.9 he appeals to God: 'Dost thou laugh at me for asking such things? Or dost thou command me to praise and confess unto thee only what I know?' In I.9 he recalls how he and his youthful companions had stolen some pears from an orchard:

> We laughed because our hearts were tickled at the thought of deceiving the owners, who had no idea of what we were doing and would have strenuously objected. Yet, again, why did I find such delight in doing this which I would not have done alone? Is it that no one readily laughs alone? No one does so readily; but still sometimes, when men are by themselves and no one else is about, a fit of laughter will overcome them when something very droll presents itself to their sense or mind. Yet alone I would not have done it - alone I could not have done it at all. (http://www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/confessions.txt)

As can be discerned from other references to laughter in his *Confessions*, I suggest that Augustine does not deny, denounce or dismiss laughter, either emanating from himself or from others, and in VII.9 almost anticipates that it is God who will laugh at him. If God can therefore be perceived to laugh, who is Augustine to condemn laughter, and in this work he clearly does not criticize it. In *City of God*, Augustine makes references to laughter (1.6, 2.9, and 2.20 where he criticizes the 'immodest laughter of the theatre'). In Book 3.25, regarding a temple to Concord built over the scene of past seditions and a massacre, he thinks the Roman goddess Discord would be roused to see such a temple raised to her adversary at the scene of her own handiwork, noting: 'those wise and learned men are enraged at our laughing at these follies' (Schaff 1890.155). (http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102.txt). From this collective use of 'our' in the context of laughter, and an implied mocking and derisive laughter reminiscent of much Old Testament laughter at that, it seems Augustine refers not only to himself, but to his fellow Christians, so perhaps it is not only the Gnostics of the period who laugh!

In Book XV. 26 Augustine examines the story of Abraham and Sarah and the promise God makes of a child, and both here and in XVI.31 fully accepts the appropriate and proper nature of the laughter involved, noting:

> The laughter of Abraham is the exultation of one who rejoices, not the scornful laughter of one who mistrusts. And those words of his in his heart, "Shall a son be born to me that am an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?" are not the words of doubt, but of wonder. (1890 Schaff translation.937)

The story continues in XVI. 31 entitled: *Of Isaac, Who Was Born According to the Promise, Whose Name Was Given on Account of the Laughter of Both Parents*:

> After these things a son was born to Abraham, according to God's promise, of Sarah, and was called Isaac, which means laughter. For his father had laughed when he was promised to him, in wondering delight, and his mother, when he was again promised by those three men, had laughed, doubting for joy; yet she was blamed by the angel because that laughter, although it was for joy, yet was not full of faith. Afterwards she was confirmed in faith by the same angel. From this, then, the boy got his name. For when Isaac was born and called by that name, Sarah showed that her laughter was not that of scornful reproach, but that of joyful praise; for she said, "God hath made me to laugh, so that every one who hears will laugh with me." Then in a little while the bond maid was cast

> out of the house with her son; and, according to the apostle, these two women signify the old and new covenants, - Sarah representing that of the Jerusalem which is above, that is, the city of God. (1890.938, 939)

To summarize, from an overall survey of his writings, Augustine had an entirely healthy regard for laughter, whether the potential laughter of God he anticipated, or the joyful laughter of his holy angels; by actually highlighting the entirely positive laughter of the patriarch Abraham and wife Sarah on the promise and gift of Isaac, he seems only to have had qualms about laughter occasioned by obscenity at the theatre.

From my research on Evagrius, there seems insufficient evidence he was unduly negative on the subject of laughter. Instead I detect a certain ambivalence, and whilst his monastic contemporary Climacus focuses on the *penthos* of mourning and tears, its aim and purpose is ultimately to achieve the 'spiritual laughter' he sees as the greatest good.

However, from Chrysostom, I suggest we can establishe clear evidence of his frequent condemnation of laughter in sermons and writings, something Gilhus and Kuschel suggest was widespread and apparent in other monastic circles during that age, but it seems to me the reality is perhaps not quite so straightforward and clear cut. I suggest this is not the complete story, for further evidence concerning laughter within the Christian community during that formative period may be drawn from yet another source, the phenomenon of the 'holy fools'.

The 'Holy Fools'

Andrew Thomas's thesis *The Holy Fools: A Theological Enquiry* (University of Nottingham, May 2009), examines the significance of the deployment of madness in the early Christian ascetic experience of holiness, and whether the first Byzantine ‘holy fools’ – themselves critics of monastic orders – represent the consistent and logical conclusion of the theology and practice of the early Christian ascetics, in particular followers of Anthony and Pachomius. Thomas considers the flight to the desert of the first Christian anchorites and coenobites was an attempt to transform the experience and theology of holiness in Church and society by transgressing the rules and thoughts of the city in a practical outworking of 'negative' theology, and the transgressive behaviour of the holy fools renewed that transformation by accepting neither secular nor religious truth and life. Thomas suggests where desert monks and nuns had transformed the production of norms by their obedience and ascetic transcendence of

human life, the holy fools undermined the religious production of such norms through their masterless obedience, defeat of vainglory, and foreignness to self, asserting:

> The transformation of the production of ethical knowledge amongst early Christian ascetics – through control of passions, representations, and silence – was followed through by the holy fools' apophatic babble and rejection of religious loci of knowledge production in liturgy, confession, religious community and ecclesial authority. As a continuation of aesthetic method of reforming the self's relationship to society by brutal truth-telling and truth-hearing, the holy fools used self-ostracising insult and laughter to follow divine truth into the periphery without legislating universal modesty and submission to group truths. As such, the holy fools exemplify the practices most idealised in early Christian asceticism – humility, suspicion of fixed orders and truths, apophatic critique of doctrine and legislation – with renewed innovation and commitment to city life. They applied the strategic moves and principles of negative theology to the Christian theology and practice of holiness through aspiring to desert freedom, the practice of ignorance, and the unserious self. (Abstract 2009) (http://etheses.nottingham.ac.uk/797/1/The_Holy_Fools_A_Theological_Enquiry.pdf)

Thomas's introduction highlights how Eastern monks and nuns had developed a sophisticated technology of personal and social transformation that baptised the philosophy of late antiquity in furthering the Church's theology, ethos, and interpretation of scripture, their holiness characterised by discipline, disconnection, and self-mastery. He suggests the very nature of this early Christian asceticism, emerging from the monastic movements of Egypt, Palestine and Syria, the first Byzantine fools react against, utilising the self-same terms as the ascetic monastics in their attempt to transform the Christian experience of the holy. Thomas suggests:

> The social order of Christendom in late antiquity was a theological order. Holy fools can be seen enacting a practical apophatic theology that takes seriously the challenges posed by the conventions and practices intertwined with meanings and utterances. With their denial of forms of life and their play on religious acts, they perform the twin elements of apophaticism: critique and play, or the *via negativa* and the *via dissimilis* (2009.18). The holy fools make a concrete contribution to theology by denying the location of holiness, modifying the force of attributes such as holiness, dispassion, and goodness. Their practice enacts the critique of the *via negativa* – by not recognising the authority

> and God-reference of religious practice – and that of the via dissimilis – by playing at being holy amongst those assumed unholy and ungood. (2009.216)

Thomas considers both early Christian ascetics and holy fools configure the relation between self and society; their attitude is one of renunciation, seeing the abandonment of the norms and knowledge of society, in other words: 'they refuse to be placed'. Thomas suggests the experience and theology of holiness is shared and transformed by the early Christian ascetics and the holy fools, in sharing the practice of the transformation of norms, knowledge, and the self's relation to society (2009.217, 218). In summary, Thomas suggests: 'holy fools make up a critique of early Christian asceticism from within the movement. They are to be understood as embracing and perfecting the religious vocation. They ascetically undermine asceticism' (2009.215).

I believe Thomas's work adds another important dimension to the story of the aceticism of those early monastic communities, and the phenomenon of the 'holy fools' highlighted by his work is a useful corrective to the negativity regarding laughter and humour of that period. We need to bear in mind what may lie behind such negativity, given Judith Perkins' (1995) insights into human self-understanding during that period, particularly within the context of monasticism, namely: 'the perception of self as sufferer' in an age used to the reality and danger of martyrdom and bodily suffering found within that wider Greco-Roman culture and tradition. I further suggest the role of the 'holy fools' also has implications for the development of a Christian theology of laughter, in recognising the potentially challenging role which laughter and humour can make upon societies and institutions, and on those who control them, where 'holy fools' can continue to play their part.

The Rule of St Benedict

Following from the writings of the early Fathers, laughter was clearly frowned upon by those later monks of the Western Church who followed the influential Rule of St Benedict (died c.547 CE), and subsequently St Bernard of Clairvaux (founder of the even more austere Cistercian tradition). This negativity towards laughter can then be traced through other writers throughout the Middle Ages, providing a continuous link to that prevalent in the Medieval period.

The Rule of St Benedict advises: 'Prefer moderation in speech and speak no foolish chatter, nothing just to provoke laughter; do not love immoderate or boisterous laughter' (4.52-54). Benedict develops this theme in Rule 7, considering twelve steps to

humility that each monk must undertake to increase in love as an adopted son of God. In Step Nine, Benedict focuses on Silence and Solitude, indicating: 'a monk controls his tongue and remains silent, not speaking unless asked a question, for Scripture warns, *In a flood of words you will not avoid sinning* (Proverbs 10:19), and, *A talkative man goes about aimlessly on earth* (Psalm 140:12)'. 'The tenth step of humility is that he is not given to ready laughter, for it is written: *Only a fool raises his voice in laughter* (Sirach 21.23)'. 'The eleventh step of humility is that a monk speaks gently and without laughter, seriously with becoming modesty, briefly and reasonably, but without raising his voice, as it is written: "*A wise man is known by his few words"*. (*The Rule of St Benedict in English* [ed. T.Fry, 1981]).

Gilhus comments: 'The many monastic rules against laughter demonstrate the power, albeit negative, that laughter was deemed to have. Laughter had to be conquered to control the body' (1997.65). Another Christian group urged to exclude laughter from their lives were the virgins, where she comments: 'Ambrose argued that when laughter creeps in modesty is relaxed' (*Concerning Virgins*, 3, 3, 9) (1997.66). Gilhus considers the key to acceptable laughter and joking among Christian monks and virgins seems to be the word 'pious', because: 'pious laughter expressed spiritual joy, never carnal desires', and as such: 'Laughter could be a sign either of spiritual awareness or of spiritual ruin. The laughter of the ideal Christian repeatedly warned against was the laughter of carnality' (1997.69).

This denunciation of laughter was justified by Old Testament passages, such as Proverbs 14.13, Ecclesiastes 7.4, and Sirach 21.15,20, but above all by the example of Christ, who (twice) wept, but never laughed. Weeping was seen as valuable, reflecting an attitude of sorrow and contrition for their sins, whereas laughter was regarded as contemptible, offensive and undignified, particularly within the religious life, where monastic self-mortification, self-control of the body and its natural urges and inclinations was normative.

Laughter in the Medieval Period and Renaissance Era

Encouragingly, during the Medieval period we find evidence for brief licence and latitude extended towards laughter in Feasts and Carnivals, especially Eastertide, where Easter laughter and Easter joy were deemed appropriate. Karl-Josef Kuschel notes:

> In German speaking countries for centuries preachers at the Easter Mass used to provoke the congregation to violent bursts of laughter – not even being afraid of obscene pantomimes and *double entendres*. This was called *risus paschalis*, Easter laughter. It was an institution which persisted. (Kuschel 1994.84)

Easter laughter was a widespread Church custom in the sixteenth century, defended by representatives of the Church, who regarded it as a legitimate way of attracting people to worship on Easter morning, in which the sexual sphere was not taboo. These celebrations were the main point in the ecclesiastical year when the comic element broke into religion, remaining to some extent in the liturgy even after the Reformation, although Kuschel notes the obscene element faded into the background (1994.86). Psalm 118 is often used in the Easter liturgy: 'this is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it' (v24), as a keynote to the jubilation and joy of the day's liturgy. Kuschel is clear: ‘Where this laughter is suppressed – for whatever pious motives – death continues to prevail, that death the death of which is proclaimed at Easter. The death of the heart prevails’ (1994.87).

Kuschel adds support to regarding laughter as a ‘word against death’, entirely appropriate at Easter rejoicing celebrating Christ’s resurrection, and the hope it engenders in the hearts of the faithful. Such ‘death of the heart’ in the suppression of laughter, is most unfortunate, given that the resurrection of Jesus Christ, is, as St Paul tells us, the dawn of a great turning point: not only the messianic change of ages, but the eschatological change from the old to the new creation, representing a great change of heart. Kuschel considers: ‘For Paul, joy is an indissoluble part of the signature of the 'new creation': despite everything that Christians have behind them and before them. According to Paul, Christians have every reason to rejoice, because they owe their new existence not to themselves but to Christ’ (1994.87, 88). Paul writes: 'Despite all our affliction, I have great pride in you; I am filled with joy' (2 Corinthians 7.4). Kuschel comments:

> A theology of joy would be nothing but a naïve suppression of reality were it not mediated critically through a theology of suffering, ... there can be no theology of joy without a theology of the cross, but conversely there can be no theology of the cross without a theology of joy. The two theologies are not mutually exclusive, but condition each other. That is what comprises Christian foolishness. (1994.88)

'Easter Laughter', with its associated joy, was an excuse for innocent amusement; contributing much to the very basis of laughter in the writings of the humanists during the Renaissance and Reformation era, particularly Rabelais' *Pantagruel*, where much fun derives from interlocking texts of Scriptures. Michael Screech believes: 'they remind us of a world of Christian laughter now largely lost' (1997.233). But laughter of parody and ridicule were also employed in France at the so-called ‘Feast of Fools’ or ‘Feast of Asses’.

Ingvild Gilhus believes the importance of the body as a vessel to truth increased during this earlier Medieval period, in which laughter culture prospered, and laughter, pious or not, flourished (1997.78). It resided in the carnivalesque body, but also introduced into the sacred presence of the suffering body of the Saviour, especially emphasised in the Eucharist, the holy sacrament of bread and wine. Gilhus asserts the body gained new significance during the high Middle Ages and Renaissance era, whereby: ‘Truth became hidden in bodies, most prominently in the secrets of the suffering body of Christ, ripped open so that its interior truth shone forth. The broken and bleeding body of Christ was celebrated through art and through piety, and made accessible in the Mass’ (Gilhus, 1997.78). Many devotional paintings from this period remain, such as the gruesome depiction of the crucified suffering body of Jesus portrayed in the Isenheim altarpiece of Grunewald, bearing testimony to Gilhus’s assertion.

The rebirth of classical ideas during the Renaissance period brought new interest in Aristotle's commentaries on laughter, but also the dialogues of Lucian, and when a popular feast and laughter culture flourished, the religious leaders of the late Middle Ages appear more divided in their appraisal of laughter than their predecessors. Gilhus reports how in conformity with sayings of Fathers of the early Church, Petrus Cantor recommended only *mentis hilaritum*, ‘spiritual joy’ (*Verbum abbreviatum*, 66), but notes how laughter was still yoked to carnality (1997.78, 79). Thomas Aquinas stretched the tolerance of the Church further, appealing to the old 'experts' on laughter, like Ambrose, John Chrysostom, and Aristotle, concluding it lawful to make use of fun to relax the soul. Augustine was another source for Aquinas, which Romano Guardini (1960.133) describes as: ‘the hearth from which the flame was drawn’, considering Aquinas a leading thinker drawing upon Augustine’s: ‘clarity of thought, ardour of heart, and depth of understanding’ (1960.17). Guardini considers Augustinian thought *Augustinus dicit* provided clear concepts establishing a systematic whole, noting: ‘His is like the root from which others developed his ideas, … Augustine and Aquinas are theology’s two main stays’ (Guardini, 1960.xvii). In *Summa Theologiae* Thomas Aquinas on humour, says:

> We take a break from serious intent and take refuge in words and deeds which are playful and humorous, giving us the pleasure we seek. Ambrose condemned jocularity in theology, but not in all social converse: Jokes are decent and pleasant in their place, but not in church, just as not in scripture. (Aquinas, 1989.440)

For Aquinas: ‘moderation is a condition characterizing all virtue, the name of a special virtue of restraint’, which: ‘controls desires’ … ‘*shame* for the ugliness of its opposing vices’, and ‘*honour* for its beauty’, whereby: ‘moderation puts balance into our sense-desire’ (1989.426, 427, 428). Gilhus notes: ‘Aquinas even agrees with Aristotle that the lack of mirth is a vice. Without radically altering the traditional position of the Church, Aquinas interpreted laughter in a more positive vein than his predecessors’, but cautions the laughter culture which flourished in these centuries under the Catholic Church, would probably not have been deemed suitable by Aquinas (1997.79). Mikhail Bahktin considers: ‘This culture included carnivals and festivals; theatrical performances in Latin and in the vernacular; and comical Latin texts parodying the holy scriptures as well as making fun of learned theological treatises and liturgies’ (1968: 11-18). Here Gilhus considers: ‘The traditional elements of religion were brought into the bodily sphere; the Gnostic position, spirit against matter, was reversed in the carnivalesque feasting inside and outside the church, in which the body was celebrated at the expense of the soul’ (1997.79,80).

Christian myth, ritual and priestly authority were infamously commented upon in the Feast of Fools, a typical example of the late Medieval laughter culture, in which Gilhus suggests: 'the interaction created by feast and carnival is based on equality and not on status; participants are close and equal' (1997.83), for the religious origins of carnivals made fun of traditional symbols subverting them with their own ludicrous symbols. At the Feast of Fools, the core symbol of the Catholic Church, the flesh and blood of the Saviour eaten in the Lord's Supper, was perverted, and a new core symbol, the Ass, introduced, which Gilhus cites as a typical example of late Medieval laughter culture, where Christian myth, ritual and priestly authority were infamously commented upon, and what: ‘started in solemnity ... ended in burlesque’ (Gilhus, 1997.80, 83). The Feast of Fools was an opening up to the sensory world, and Gilhus refers to a letter from the Theology Faculty in Paris acknowledging: 'foolishness, which is our second nature and seems to be inherent in man, might freely spend itself at least once a year', noting: 'To immerse oneself in jocularities and laughter had become a necessary indulgence for human beings' (1997.80). Gilhus believes this comical performance and laughter got its peculiar formulation from priests' desire to question the power and values of the

Catholic Church, particularly: 'the relationship between humans and animals, man and woman, high and low in the priestly hierarchy, body and soul' (1997.82). The values of Catholic symbols were turned upside-down and made objects of subversive laughter, with new values created through their deformation (1997.84, 85), Gilhus noting:

> The participants in this feast were invited systematically to laugh at the ideology and ritual of the Catholic Church ... (and) derived no small part of their amusement from ludicrous parodies of the Mass, in which they made comical contrasts between the salvific flesh of the incarnated body of Christ and the material human body. (1997.86)

Here in carnivalesque laughter, Gilhus considers a contrast was triggered between two symbolic constructions of the body, one expressed through the elaborated mythology and theology of the Catholic Church, the other through the grotesque bodily imagery of carnival (1997.87). In this situation, the priests exploited the tension present in the Catholic religious system, played with it, and used it as 'fuel' for their feast, whereby Gilhus thinks: ‘The priests feasted not only to let off steam and to relieve pressure, they also feasted to have fun’ (1997.87). Here she thinks: ‘Applied to Medieval Christianity, this delicate balance – really, a tension of opposites – can be seen in the conflict between the ideal life of Christ and the real life of the Church, which was ventilated in the carnival of the fools’ (1997.88), accentuating the contrast between the simple, egalitarian life of the first apostles, and the existence of a hierarchical Church with power, pomp and circumstance. Thus Gilhus suggests: ‘In the Feast of Fools, the conflict between high and low, hierarchy and lack of hierarchy, ideal life versus real Church was ventilated ... aggressively, … but in the end, the conflict was again made to seem harmless’ (1997.88).

This sort of activity preludes the mocking parody seen later in the Reformation era against the Catholic Church and its practices, for example, the Protestant reformers’ dismissal and description of ritual as ‘hocus pocus’, and reservation of the blessed sacrament as ‘Jack in the box’. Paralleling Gilhus's work, Ryan Giles (2009) details similar mocking festivities in late medieval/Renaissance Spain, noting:

> Throughout the liturgical year, with its cycles of carnivalesque and Lenten seasons, representatives of the Spanish Church permitted and sometimes participated in irreverent celebrations. During the Yuletide holidays, choristers and sacristans were allowed to disrupt the solemnity of the liturgy and elect mock bishops.... An expression of the spirit of riotous seasons like the *festum*

> *stultorum* (feast of fools) can be found in the writing of scurrilous works known as *parodia sacra.* (2009.6)

In Medieval England, laughter took a more pietistic and devotional form in celebrations at the Feast of Corpus Christi (Thursday after Trinity Sunday), where, rather than parodying the Mass, comedy and laughter showed themselves primarily in associated religious mystery plays. Gilhus also notes: ‘The jocular commentaries of the priestly fools had their counterpart in the religious plays of England, in which laughter was more directly linked to the death of Christ and to his saving body, and served a more obvious religious purpose’, whereby:

> The cycles of English plays were originally a fruit of the Corpus Christi, the feast in which the symbolic Eucharistic world of the Medieval period culminated. The host was carried through the streets of the towns in Europe, for everyone to adore. In the wake of the feast, one of the most popular theatres the world has ever seen came into being. (1997.88)

Gilhus notes these English plays exhibited the most sacred parts of religion, transforming them into comedy, and making people laugh. Similar in style to Dante's *Divina Comedia,* the tenor of the cycles was comic, starting with the creation, followed by the fall of Lucifer and of Adam and Eve, and after dwelling on the Passion, ended with the Resurrection and its promise of joy and salvation (1997.99). The most famous was *The Second Shepherd's Play* (sixteenth century), by the ‘Wakefield Master’, where a simple comical technique of incongruity was used with an abundance of comical paradoxes. In the context of the play (and relevant to Corpus Christi) the stolen sheep was equated to Christ (the ‘real’ sacrificial lamb and true *Agnus Dei*), who had 'carried the sins of the world', with a further connection made between the newborn 'child' and the Mass, the Lord's Supper. Regarding these, Gilhus asserts: ‘The Corpus Christi feast was a celebration of the Eucharist; the mystery plays were a special celebration of that sacrament, staging the whole salvation story and stressing how it had altered the destiny of humanity’ (1997.91,92). The more recent revival of these plays is a phenomenon of the modern age, relevant to our consideration of laughter in post-modernity. Gilhus believes that:

> In the plays both a derisive laughter striking at evil and a more complicated creative laughter playing on the corporality and doubleness of central Christian symbols are present. Laughter is drawn into the sphere of the violated divine

> body, which in this late phase of Medieval Christianity has become a profound source of religious meaning. (1997.97)

My own reading leads me to similar positive conclusions to Gilhus regarding the collective nature of these Medieval embodied festivities contrasting with the basic sociology of the present age, where there appears to be a greater self-reliance by the individual. Nonetheless, with comedy and laughter, I suggest the collective can still come to the fore. Such evidence indicates that religious laughter in the late Medieval period had moved away from mythological texts and monastic rules, to re-appear in this collective form within Church life. Gilhus suggests:

> The impulse to laugh in the Middle Ages was no longer censored as it was in the early Church with its battle against the body. Nor was laughter, as in Gnostic religion, used to lay bare the polarity of soul and body. Taken together, these examples reflect a development in the Christian history of laughter from laughter being singled out as an object for restrictions to it being fostered through religious theatres and feasts. (1997.98)

With the Reformation and its associated upheavals, Gilhus suggests: 'The Corpus Christi plays represent a last bravura celebrating the divine body before it was exposed to the cold light of the Age of Reason' (1997.99). After the Reformation (Gilhus notes that Luther detested no feast as much as Corpus Christi [Rubin 1991:355] [1997.100]), in those areas where the reformers held sway, the eucharistic meal became spiritually interpreted as a symbolic anamnesis of the Last Supper, paradoxically reduced to a bodiless sign. Some may argue this represents a more enlightened view. Gilhus notes:

> While the suffering of Christ and his sacrifice on behalf of humanity stood at the emotional core of late medieval religion, Protestant religion spoke more to reason than to emotions. Protestantism not only undermined religious drama, it cast a crucial light on laughter in general. (1997.100)

Whilst the imposition of Protestantism in Tudor times may have undermined religious drama, arguably it opened the door to a golden age for English literature as in *The Book of Common Prayer* (1549, 1552, 1559, and 1662), and the Authorised Version of the Bible (1611). Flourishing playwrights William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlow, and fellow authors promoted non-religious and historical plays and drama, not in Church, but in newly constructed theatres such as Shakespeare’s Globe. This trickle in favour of laughter and humour becomes more apparent in the written work of the

Renaissance scholars, and survived the mayhem and religious upheavals of the Reformation divisions within the Church early in the sixteenth century. I suggest this may have helped the societal evolution towards modernity, providing roots for the development of a theology of laughter today. However, there was little scope for laughter as a 'word against death', since the divisions of the Reformation era led to the condemnation of many on either side of the growing religious divide, people being condemned by their opponents as 'heretics', and often burnt at the stake.

The move towards a gradual rehabilitation of laughter, and developments in the understanding of the role of laughter and humour in religion within the life of the Western Church became more apparent around the Reformation in Europe, where Renaissance and humanist scholars such as Erasmus of Rotterdam and Francois Rabelais provided improved (and more accurate) biblical translations from the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. This improved scholarship led towards some recovery of the role and use of laughter within the life of the wider Church, where some discovered that from the Biblical narrative, humour and laughter could be implied or discerned, and found a greater freedom of thought, as enabled Erasmus and Rabelais to liberate laughter found previously in Medieval Carnival and Feast. This remained an age that displayed earthiness in its attitude to the body and its functions, and the laughter generated thereby. The Reformation Era proved a dangerous time for many: beliefs and theology were no laughing matter if you were on the wrong side of the prevailing authority.

Erasmus and Rabelais

Change began when great Renaissance authors such as Erasmus, Rabelais, and Martin Luther opted firmly for Christian laughter. Michael Screech notes: 'Laughter flourished in the soil of Renaissance Christian controversy', and, providing it served theological and moral purposes, its use was permissible with a good conscience if justified with the help of their Bibles (1997.7). The Renaissance was not solely about religion, but also the emancipation of man, and a shift in enlightenment. Screech suggests what Aristotle wrote about laughter: 'became so naturalized within Christendom – not least through the works of Thomas Aquinas – that it could not be ignored' (1997.13). The Latin translation and commentaries by Marsilio Ficino provided a fruitful source for Erasmus and Rabelais to draw upon when considering Plato's thoughts on laughter. Screech highlights how Erasmus read much of Plato and Socrates into his Christianity, and Aristotle too, never compromising the uniqueness of Christ, suggesting: 'it was for him the height of faith and reason to gloss Paul with

Plato, and Plato with Paul'. Screech thinks the humanists found in Plato something fresher, newer, deeper, and that for them, what Socrates and Plato had to say about laughter was novel and heady (1997.58, 59). The dialogue of Plato in *Philebus* proved fruitful for establishing the basis for laughter, being: 'concerned above all with the nature of the good, and the relation to the good of knowledge and pleasure', recognising: 'that many emotions can be good, bad, or mixed', with laughter here placed: 'amongst the mixed emotions' (1997.59). Screech considers laughter for Socrates was a mixed emotion, noting: 'For many Christian laugh-raisers the Socratic notion that the butt of a wise man's laughter remains a friend led them to temper the harshness of their laughter, and to take something off its cutting-edge' (Plato, *Philebus*, 49A-50C) (1997.60).

At the time Erasmus and Rabelais were living and writing (whom Screech considers: 'the two most successful laugh-raisers of the Renaissance period'), laughter was frequently held as provoked by madness, folly, insanity, and ignorance. Erasmus and Rabelais recognised that laughter is a pleasure, that people like to laugh, and do not wait for pure madness to present itself first. Their insights can be seen as the trigger enriching both theory and practice of laughter-raising.

Screech notes: 'Madness lies in the eye of the beholder. Those who, from the foot of the Cross, laughed at Jesus in his anguish, did so because they took him for a fool' (1997.67). It could be argued the event itself is laughable, because from a Gnostic perspective, this episode is a parody. Screech reports one early Christian influence on Erasmus was Jerome (1997.77). Erasmus had confidence in the ultimate efficacy of laughter, and Jerome's notion of mutual laughter of worldly fool and Christian fool helps us appreciate the lasting qualities of Christian laughter as Erasmus understood it, recognized: 'as much in fourth-century Rome as in seventeenth-century Paris' (1997.72). Screech suggests Erasmus associated his entire theology with the madness of Christianity, the folly of the Gospel, and the madness of Christ, and speaks of: 'christianized platonism which revolutionized the thought of Erasmus' (his interpretation of neo-platonism) (1997.96). He notes worldly people would find Christ mad, and those who follow him must expect to be laughed at, suggesting that Erasmus realised the unworldly would find the self-denying life of Christians insane, and, by their standards, they would be (1997.105).

Erasmus and Rabelais turned to the laughter-raisers of classical literature, particularly Greek authors like Lucian of Samosata, whom Erasmus and Rabelais found challenging but stimulating; he was one who lived at the time of the early Church, late

enough to know Christianity, yet to irresistibly laugh at it, although some regarded him as anti-Christian (1997.150). Screech considers in Lucian they found a laughing support for their evangelical faith, where both: 'turned to Lucian for guidance, and both used their laughter to illuminate abuses in the teaching and structures of the Church,' and yet despite Lucian's anti-Christian reputation: 'others knew they would find in him refined moral laughter' (1997.150, 151). Screech considers: 'The Renaissance reader showed that he enjoyed the happy marriage between Christian zeal and Lucianical laughter … [as] the long list of Humanists who translated works of Lucian into Latin testify to a wide appreciation of his sense of fun and to their delight in it'. Of Lucian's many translators, Screech says: 'whatever else separated them, their enjoyment of Lucian brought them together' (1997.151):

> The laughter that Lucian directed at the classical gods, pedants or charlatans readily lends itself to be adapted to mock popes, scholastic theologians, and monks, as well as the superstitious cult of saints and other accretions to evangelical doctrine. With the help of Lucian, heretics, false prophets, and theologians ignorant of Greek could be treated as idiots or nincompoops, their ideas compounded of stupidity and madness. (1997.153)

Satire and laughter at ignorance and madness are found in Erasmus's *Annotations of the New Testament*, especially would-be authorities with inadequate Latin or Greek, whose gaffes in translation Erasmus criticises, laughs at, and ridicules, even of Thomas Aquinas. Screech believes Erasmus was careful not to incur accusations of disloyalty to Mother Church! Screech reports Aquinas's towering reputation: 'was based on his marriage of Christian theology and the philosophy of Aristotle'; nonetheless Erasmus criticizes him: “how could Thomas even guess at what Aristotle meant on the basis of a Latin version which Aristotle in person could not have understood, even if he had been hot on Latin!” (1997.163). In his commentary and annotations, Screech believes: 'Erasmus's laughter at ignorance is inexhaustible', but Erasmus was himself bitterly laughed at, scorned, and ridiculed by others (1997.165), because Aquinas had constructed an Aristolean underpinning of Christian theology which even Erasmus would not contradict.

In a letter (30 November 1532), Rabelais acknowledged his debt to Erasmus. Screech comments: ‘He too was to show that laughter can be allied to evangelical piety and evangelical religion. But the Christian laugh they raise is very different. Comedy is not wit’ (1997.212). Screech thinks Erasmus found French culture open to coarseness and over-free satire. His natural and chosen territory was wit, not comedy, not seasonal fun-

and-games, and his crimped attitude towards seasonal licence severely limited the scope of Christian laughter for those who followed him, because: 'The wise avoid excessive laughter' (1997.216). He considers Erasmus an exemplar of Christian wit, and Rabelais of Christian comedy, noting that Rabelais exploited the works of Erasmus in all his French books (even the minor ones), but never wrote in his style, seeing himself rather as an artist in the French language, which, Screech says, he: 'created, moulded, exploited and exemplified', asserting: ‘doubtless Rabelais learned from Erasmus that Christian truths can be defended by laughter, and laughter is the means of reducing heresy and error to the kinds of worldly madness which Christians can contain’ (1997.220).

Screech thinks Rabelais was earthy in his comedy writing, using: ‘grosser words, especially scatological ones,’ and ‘dwelling on our bodily functions' (1997.224); thereby he: 'opened up the entire range of their culture and scholarship to Christian laughter' (1997.225). 'Easter Laughter' gave excuse for innocent amusement, contributing to the very basis of laughter in Rabelais's *Pantagruel,* where Shrovetime merriment is seen at its best, with fun, games, general laughter and merriment. With Lucian's name, the story originally ended, but Screech thinks Rabelais put sound and rare learning to good comic effect, something delightful to laugh at, enlarging the scope for Shrovetide comedy within the Old Testament. He notes:

> It is in the spirit of carnival to laugh for a while at what is normally admired or awesome. A great deal of laughter in *Pantagruel* is evoked against a normally revered spiritual background. Rabelais's writings show him as accepting Scripture as the normative and inspired word of God (1997.230). But *Pantagruel* draws its merriment not only from the Old Testament but from the New, not excluding the very words of Christ. (1997.230)

For Screech, the laughter is Christian because its references are Christian, the awe it presupposes is Christian, and the expectations aroused are Christian. Here his view may be purely subjective, but he thinks those who need footnotes to point out the scriptural references would never savour such jokes, as do those who experience the sudden glory of recognizing the awesome in the trivial, suggesting in Rabelais’ work: 'such jokes are a homage paid to Holy Writ' (1997.236). He considers Rabelais' work contains a number of in-jokes, so that: 'as for those who know nothing of either, they are simply excluded from the fun' (1997.236), suggesting:: 'that form of Christian laughter is part of a wider pattern of fun at the expense of what we hold dear … such laughter is not hostile and satirical; it is all part of professional fun-and-games'

(1997.237, 238). Screech reports *Pantagruel* delighted readers of French, with Rabelais expanding the Shrovetide laughter in later editions of *Pantagruel,* indicating that such laughter remained appreciated and understood; but he cautions: 'Christian laughter will never have it easy. Hovering in the background there remains a curious alliance of disapproving forces' (1997.238, 239).

Rabelais' *Gargantua* reminds us that jesting on sacred subjects flourished in educated circles, for there we are treated to a series of clerical jokes from the Well-Drunken, Screech noting: 'Christian laughter has in-jokes in plenty. The most firmly Christian are those which derive their laughter from the very texts which Christians venerate; without the veneration there would be no joke' (1997.231, 232). We may question whether during the Reformation period there was much risk-taking in this furtive parody, given that the well-to-do could never be under any substantial threat. All Rabelais' books seem preoccupied with signs, whether by gestures, sounds (including words), pictures, or emblems, but even these bodily gestures and functions are seen by Rabelais as signs with particular meaning, some natural and spontaneous, others having to be learnt to understand their full import and meaning.

Screech thinks that with *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua*, Rabelais made his Christian laughter more accessible to a public (including a courtly one) not educated in Latin, and of the two: '*Guargantua* ... is far more Humanist in its terms of reference', evoking: 'Plato and Socrates rather than the still popular medieval Romances and their popular or parodic successors' (1997.240). Screech suggests: ‘Rabelais's schoolboy humour ... dirt and faeces have an artistic purpose. They are triggers of laughter; not laughter with, but laughter at. Since most of the faecal humour is centred on the young Gargantua, we are encouraged to see it as boyish’ (1997.240).

For both Rabelais and Erasmus, Christianity is the 'philosophy of Christ', teaching people how to spiritualise their souls and 'animate' their bodies. Screech thinks Christian laughter gains immeasurably whenever it finds madness to laugh at in human deeds, errors, weakness and vices, and: 'It gains immeasurably too when it gladly accepts itself as madness in the eyes of the world' (1997.263). Screech thinks the moral tension in Rabelais is characteristic of Christian comedy in general, noting: ‘It is fun to laugh; laughter is potentially a powerful moral force; it can be directed to good theological and moral ends: yet the wise man controls it’ (1997.308). Screech asserts: ‘The laughter of Rabelais is played out against a background of God, time, and eternity.' For Rabelais: 'one verse of Scripture, properly cited, can outweigh pages of ingenious rhetoric' (1997.300, 301).

Through Renaissance scholars such as Erasmus and Rabelais, I believe we can trace the gradual rehabilitation of laughter within Christian circles (drawing upon scriptures in Erasmus's case, and earthiness of humour and laughter in Rabelais' work). This paved the way for a greater appreciation of humour and laughter in the Reformation era, as traced in the plays of Shakespeare. Where laughter appears in the literature of the period, it expresses another view of the human condition, although also seeking to reveal other facets of human characteristics, but often a seriousness empty of laughter, as found in elements of tragedy and love in Shakespeare's works. As to drawing upon laughter and humour as 'words against death' in this material, there is ample scope within the comedy material of Rabelais' *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* books, and their fund of stories and amusing episodes I believe support this aspect of my thesis.

Having traced the history of laughter in Christianity through to the Renaissance and Reformation Era, we now turn to consider the role and function of laughter within modernity and post-modernity, as viewed from a religious perspective.

CHAPTER FIVE: LAUGHTER AND ITS ROLE AND FUNCTION IN MODERNITY AND POST-MODERNITY FROM A RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE, AND THE LINK BETWEEN LAUGHTER AND THEOLOGY IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

This chapter traces the development of the role and function of laughter and humour in religious life through into the present day, by considering the impact of Modernism and Post-Modernism (developed since the Enlightenment period), and evidence of their effect upon the role of laughter and humour in today's society. My research leads me to believe a relevant theology of laughter can be developed to address post-modernity, and further, one where the role of laughter as a ‘word against death’ can be more readily perceived. In considering modernism and post-modernism, the description from S. Brent Plate (2006) is helpful:

> Modernity can roughly be understood as a post-medieval social movement that reached its full expression in the mid-nineteenth century. It is, by and large, a European invention that has been exported to a number of other regions - most prominently, North America - and the term 'developing nation' is synonymous with that of modernizing nation. (2006.138)

Plate supports the generally held consensus that modernity originated through several interlocking social, political, technological, and philosophical developments, encompassing the period of the Enlightenment, the apparent triumph of scientific world-views, the impact of the Industrial Revolution, and European expansionism and colonization which began in the sixteenth century and developed apace into the twentieth century (2006.138). Plate considers modernity can only move towards the future by repressing the past (at least in part), but thinks the repressed eventually returns, with modernity's progressive orientation simultaneously unearthing its other, such as when religious revival movements seek their identity in a perceived past in which God still controlled the events of the world (2006.138), an important point which impacts on the role of religion.

Keiran Flanaghan and Peter Jupp (1996) describe aspects of post-modernism as:

> Incredulity, fragmentation, pastiche and contextualisation, the domain properties of postmodernism, have percolated into almost every aspect of culture and economy. Postmodernism is the term which has come to denote the uncertainty of living in an intensified, commodified culture

> where attachments, so easily unsecured, undermine the making of commitments. Even if made, they relate to no moral purpose; there is no galvanizing consensus as to what this ambition might be. Thus, postmodernism denotes a term of change and decay, of fear and resignation now exasperated by the onset of the millennium. (1999.xiii)

But these authors suggest all is not doom and gloom, noting after the initial onslaught of post-modernity, the self and issues of identity have crept back from the fringes, and once again occupy the centre-stage of domain concerns with culture, suggesting the popularisation of post-modernism has not so much de-constructed the term, as demystified it, and as an emblem of the human condition, it has lost its reverential distance in the text: ‘because it has no rules of definition, post-modernism can mean what one wishes, hence its appropriation into myriads of cultural orders and disorders. It has now become an instrument of belief and liberation’ (1999.xiii). Flanaghan has good news for students of theology and religious studies:

> Postmodernity denotes a condition of ambiguity with implications for religiosity. Unexpectedly, it has placed issues of religion back on the agenda of mainstream sociology. As an issue it seems disconnected from society, a corpse modernity buried with a tombstone called secularisation, but now comes a resurrection, the seeds of which can be denoted in the issues that have come to signify postmodernity. There are distinctive signs of religion being on the cultural agenda, but in a condition of ambiguity which postmodernity signifies. Inversions of religiosity are clear in the supposed postsecularity of postmodernity. (1999.1, 2)

Flanaghan considers whilst post-modernity initially seemed to confirm the destruction of traditional forms of religious belief: 'the definiteness of the post-secular agenda implicit in postmodernity seems at odds with its claim that all narratives had collapsed', because post-modernity lacks the authoritative capacity to rule on the basis of reason, with a pluralism and heresy now afflicting post-Enlightenment culture itself, where no means of transcending judgement are possible (1999.3). He rejoices that: ‘The destructive forces of secularity which slew religion and which characterised modernity, in postmodernity have been turned inward in an implosion of images and opportunities for self-actualisation’ (1999.4). Yet he believes that post-modernity has its uses, by enabling a theoretical consensus to exist within sociology that there is no consensus as such (1999.8).

Many issues in the debates over modernity have been bolstered by a scientific view of

the world, beginning with empirical philosophers like Bacon, John Locke, David Hume, and found in the writings of Charles Darwin, each of whom continues to influence the ongoing philosophical debate in post-modernity. Plate notes: ‘The debate between science and religion (from evolution versus 'intelligent design' to euthanasia and genetic engineering) continues to occupy a good deal of political and religious energy into the twenty-first century, and we find artists toying with this debate in their work’ (2006.144). Significantly for this thesis, Plate thinks what vexes many viewers in the modern age is precisely a confrontation with death, something modernity notoriously keeps out of sight (and thereby out of mind), suggesting modernity itself may act as a kind of 'word against death', by disguising death’s reality and presence within our contemporary society. To counter this cloaking of death, Plate believes some artists can nonetheless confront us with images of the reality of death in all its starkness and potential horror, which modernity seeks to avoid.

Paul Lakeland (1997) considers the Enlightenment gave us the autonomy of human reason, the notion of human rights, and the struggle for a just and equitable society, and that the Enlightenment project of modernity was, and remains, the triumph of reason and the mastery of the human mind over the external world (1997.13). He notes how Immanuel Kant’s masterful great work *Critique of Pure Reason* (erroneously described as an essay on Enlightenment), helped inaugurate the concept of modernity, but that Jurgen Habermas believes Kant’s work succeeds in opening modernity up to the depredations of post-modern thought, with the Kantian destruction of the unified pre-modern world of myth, metaphysics, and religion, opening the way for its replacement by the transcendental subject, whose powers of reason organize experience, where the pre-modern authority of metaphysics or religion collapses over the reasoning subject, and instead become merely subdivisions of experience, and thus dimensions of subjectivity (1997.14,15). Lakeland suggests for Habermas, the ‘postmodern’ world is a product of an unbalanced development of the Enlightenment legacy (1997.23).

Lakeland considers, consciously or unconsciously, the present moment takes an attitude towards the preceding time and all that has gone before, with post-modernism providing a critical reappraisal of modernity, by breaking down what had previously been taken as ‘givens’, whilst: ‘wiping out modernity’s claim to scientific accuracy, objective truth, and universal reason’ (1987.89). However, on the positive side for theology and theologians, Lakeland believes that post-modernity succeeds in: ‘reinscribing mystery - and hence religion - within the everyday world’ (1997.89). Lakeland’s work explores how the so-called post-modern character of our

contemporary culture affects the religious tradition, and how that tradition can meaningfully address the questions post-modernism poses concerning subjectivity, moral pluralism, and respect for “otherness”, challenging theologians to rethink all their understandings concerning God, Christ, and the Church.

Lakeland thinks: ‘the Enlightenment project of modernity was and remains the triumph of reason and the mastery of the human mind over the external world’, but feels in post-modernity we need to make our own assessment to determine the balance of positive and negative forces within it, warning: ‘when religion and metaphysics are renounced as guides, contingency replaces foundations’, only for post-modernity itself to become replaced by the individual exercise of critical reason (1997.13, 14). Lakeland speculates whether the ‘post-modern’ label accurately depicts today’s world, and how that then informs the agenda for religion and theology. This requires examination of the language used in the post-modern debate, and assessment of the reality which post-modernism claims to denote, suggesting three issues he feels need to be addressed, namely (1) the post-modern “problem of God”; (2) the role of the Christian community in the post-modern world; and (3) the implications of the traditional claims of Christian uniqueness in the face of post-modernity’s attention to otherness (1997.39).

Richard C. Stern, Clayton N. Jefford, and Guerric Debona (1999) illustrate some themes and signs of post-modernism, particularly noting:

> There are no larger, overarching value structures to which one can appeal or, more accurately, there are too 'many' value structures to which one can appeal. There is no single structure. There is recognition, even a proclamation, … that life contains a large measure of absurdity. (1999.236, 237)

By recognising that life contains a large measure of absurdity, and humour and laughter occur as natural responses, I suggest that post-modernity, whilst sweeping away many of the old certainties and cultural norms of former years, nonetheless gives such permission and licence to laugh at all that is absurd and humorous, even some of the trials, tribulations, and paradoxes inherent in being human, including death, reminding us of our mortal and finite existence. Further, such laughter can become a ‘word against death’.

If, as Flanaghan states, post-modernity has brought religion back on to the cultural agenda, Paul McDonald (2010), explores the relationship between humour and post-modernism within American culture, where optimism and idealism are seen as

fundamental, particularly in terms of the so-called American dream, and coupled with material self-advancement underpinning the American success ethic. McDonald considers the 'Romantic' notion of America, is discernible in American counter-culture, whose narratives can critique American values. McDonald thinks idealism survives in post-modernist counter-culture texts and is sustained by humour, and that there is a fundamental link between humour and post-modernism, a phenomenon he sees as strongly associated with American culture (2010.90).

Where post-modernism refers to ways of thinking about the world that emphasise doubt, chaos, and relativism, and the disappearance of reality, and having bleak implications (difficult to reconcile with American optimism), McDonald recognizes this has liberating potential, demonstrating how various American humorists bring comedy to bear on some of the negative implications of philosophical post-modernism, and have successfully explored and found ways of reclaiming value. McDonald suggests humour and laughter provide a corrective to many of the problems and shortcomings arising from post-modernism, establishing a fundamental link between them (2010.12, 13). His work gives grounds for hope that humour can mitigate some of the effects of pernicious relativism and pessimism in post-modernity noted by Christopher Norris (1993), where relativism was a dangerous dead end, heralding a world where it is impossible to make moral evaluations, and where the possibility of progress was compromised (1993.278).

McDonald believes humour can redeem post-modernism, by either reasserting or re-establishing the values many see as incompatible with post-modernism, suggesting: 'humour itself *constitutes* a solution, … [that] humour can work to resolidify those values which so readily melt into laughter in postmodern culture, … [and] offers a route back to significant values, and a potential corrective to pessimism … [that] reasserts value and reveals a degree of optimism in the midst of a phenomenon so often associated with relativism, chaos and cynicism' (2010.20, 23). Whilst acknowledging humour can be conservative and self-defeating, McDonald considers it offers a way of evading the controlling narratives of society, in which laughter is associated with potential progress and possibility for the future (2010.24).

McDonald cites Simon Critchley's book (2002) and its affinities with Jean Luc Nancy's notion of the 'transcendental laugh', a: 'laugh born of uncertainty and inevitable human imperfection', one which evokes: 'the smile of knowing self-mockery … [that] does not bring unhappiness, but rather elevation and liberation, the lucidity of consolation', where Critchley notes the human capacity to smile at our wretchedness which

distinguishes us as a species, and makes us great. McDonald sees self-awareness as the first step toward circumventing conflict, creating humour which enables us to laugh less at individuals and more at ourselves (2010.88, 89). Shadowed here in self-awareness is humour, with laughter an appropriate and positive celebration of life, functioning as a ‘word against death’. As American stand-up comic Bill Hicks noted in a letter the year before dying from pancreatic cancer: “Laughter makes the bitter swallowing of truth, for some, a little easier” (2010.94), a defiant ‘word against death’. McDonald concludes post-modernism has shaped aspects of the American experience commonly explored by its humorists, such as ethnicity, social relations, and the American ideal (dream). Simon Critchley’s ‘smile of knowing self-mockery’ is the humour of recognition and empathy of value here, which is what makes us human. For McDonald says:

> It is a comic admission of imperfection which refuses hierarchy and, from this position of equality, offers the possibility of progress, … a common bond, … and something of transcendent value. Once more humour creates a world in which values are relative, but at the same time it offers itself – its own significance and potential – as something that circumvents relativity. (2010.129)

Humour and laughter become expressions of our common humanity, vehicles for ingenious assertions and symbols of transcendent significance that can sustain life and meaning in the post-modern chaos, McDonald concluding that we need to recognize the unifying facet of laughter and humour as themselves something of great value in the relativistic and ostensibly valueless world of post-modernity (2010.131).

We turn now to a novel which exemplifies many of the traits of post-modernity.

Umberto Eco and his Novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980)

Eco's world-famous novel (seen by critics as displaying a 'post-modern spirit'), enables us to look at laughter and humour through the lens of post-modernity, given that it is probably this 'postmodern spirit' which has brought some recovery of laughter and a sense of humour back into contemporary religion and religious life. Both Kuschel and Gilhus focus upon Eco's novel, with Kuschel devoting twenty pages to analysis (1994.22-42), his own work on a theology of laughter being an answer to the challenge this novel poses (1994.xix). Kuschel considers that in taking up the problem of laughter, Eco's novel casts light on basic problems of philosophy and theology (the questions addressed in his book), namely: Is there order in the world?, Is there binding truth?, and can one know this order and truth?, and questions whether interpreting the

'signs' of this world, one comes to grief, only to be left with resignation and the mockery of any truth? Kuschel seeks to determine where we might derive the basic criterion for truth, what we might rely on, and how we should act in situations where the world itself seems to be simply chaos, with no recognizable order in the 'signs' (1994.xix).

Kuschel's critical discussion of Eco's work leads us back to the discussions of the ancient Greeks (Plato and his successors), whether one should laugh at everything, and whether laughter is 'beyond good and evil' (1994.xx). In looking at laughter in post-modernity (seen as a ‘signature’ of post-modernity), we come full circle to the beginnings of our quest in the laughter of antiquity. Brought up to date into present-day culture, the realms of post-modernity in society today, Kuschel explores the connection between laughter and this diagnosis of post-modernity used to offer a critique of today's culture, given the concept: 'is as popular as it is disputed' (1994.32).

Kuschel perceives the project of modernity, with its human and Enlightenment potential, is not rejected, but is developed further dialectically, understood as a 'sublation' of modernity in the threefold Hegelian sense, involving the affirmation of its humane content, negation of the inhumane limits, and the transcending of modernity in the direction of what he sees as a new, differentiated, pluralistic and holistic synthesis (1994.32). But Kuschel notes alternative approaches to this subject associate post-modernity with a reactionary anti-modernity, or a radical pluralism negating all binding values, where the epistemological sphere radically denies there is a single truth, and in the ethical sphere, radically denies there are universal, generally binding criteria and values (1994.33). He reports others view post-modernism as:

> the dissolution of all previous patterns of thought, writing, and life, and the regaining of the greatest possible plurality of contents, styles, cultures and languages, both synchronous (the awareness of a global contemporaneity), and diachronous (the awareness of a historical contemporaneity). (1994.33)

It is this viewpoint, in the sphere of aesthetics, that Kuschel considers Eco’s novel fits, Eco himself, as a professor of 'semiotics', interpreting his 'theory of signs' as 'a theory of lies'. Kuschel notes that semiotics (which describes itself as 'the science above all sciences'), formally describes the use of signs, all cultures, world views, texts and works of art, as of equal weight and value, and semiotics as a meta-science which produces a universal supra-historical capacity for making a connection between all cultural phenomena. This suggests historical differences are no longer seen as

insurmountable limits, but just meanings among others (1994.36, 37). Kuschel describes laughter as subversive, and liberation from anxiety. My own briefer analysis of Eco's work focuses upon the dialogue between Jorge (the blind librarian of the monastery) and William of Baskerville (the Franciscan friar), because I believe here we can draw evidence for the use of laughter as a 'word against death'.

Set in the year 1327 at the monastry of Melk, the plot centres on one book in the monastic library, a copy of Aristotle's (now missing) work on comedy, of which Jorge is the keeper and guardian. Jorge is determined to suppress knowledge of both its existence and contents, which would give dangerous licence for laughter, and so the book is hidden locked away in the library tower, its pages lethally poisoned, intended to eliminate any who seek to read its liberating contents, entirely contrary to the prevailing monastic-led culture denouncing all joy and laughter within ecclesiastical circles. At their first meeting in the Scriptorium, Jorge vigorously censures all who cannot suppress laughter, despite many monks illustrating precious manuscripts by incorporating 'grotesques' into the margins, signs to Jorge of a perverse world providing outlandish figures to laugh at, which William defends as merely harmless "marginal images" (1980.79). Jorge retorts: 'Our Lord did not have to empty such foolish things to point out the straight and narrow path to us. Nothing in his parables arose laughter, or fear' (1980.81), later adding: "John Chrysostom said that Christ never laughed" (1980.95), reflecting the attitude which cast laughter in a negative light.

At the time Eco's book is set in, Thomas Aquinas (the greatest recipient of Aristotle in the West) had already been dead for half a century, Kuschel noting Aristotle was already *the* authority for Christianity, and if such an authority had devoted a whole book to laughter, then laughter could not morally be considered to be reprehensible, suggesting: 'Would that not have removed the ground from any denunciation of laughter?' (1994.27). Jorge is keen at any cost (including murder) to maintain the prevailing *status quo*, with Aristotle's "missing" book contaminated so that curious monks handling it would pay for the "poisoning" of the spirit and contamination of their minds by the actual poisoning of their bodies and death. Eco puts the denunciation of laughter on Jorge's lips:

> Laughter shakes the body, distorts the features of the face, making man similar to the monkey. … Laughter is a sign of foolishness. He who laughs does not believe in what he laughs at. But neither does he hate it. Therefore, laughing at evil means no preparing oneself to combat it, and laughing at good means denying the power through which self is

> propagating (1980.131). … The spirit is serene only when it contemplates the truth and takes delight in the good achieved, and truth and good are not to be laughed at. This is why Christ did not laugh, laughter forments doubt. (1980.132)

Kuschel comments here that laughter is not seen as an instrument for discovering truth, but rather as an expression of the loss of truth, even the denial of truth, for Jorge is suggesting laughter is not part of an ultimately ordered world, but the expression of a world which has become perverted, a world in which religion, morality, politics and society, have been turned upside down (1994.29). The climax of Jorge's argument follows on:-

> Laughter is weakness, corruption, the foolishness of our flesh. It is the peasants' entertainment, the drunkards licence; even the church in her wisdom has granted the moment of feast, carnival, fair, this durinal pollution that releases humours and distracts from other desires and other ambitions … still, *laughter remains base*, a defence for the simple, a mystery desecrated for the plebians. (1980.474)

Jorge's argument indicates he is aware of the contents of Aristotle's "missing" volume, where:

> The function of laughter is reversed, it is *elevated to art*, the doors of the world of the learned are opened to it, it becomes the object of philosophy, and of perfidious theology … Laughter frees the villain from fear of the Devil, because in the feast of fools the Devil also appears poor and foolish, and therefore controllable. (1980.474)

Jorge complains: 'that laughter is proper to man is a sign of our limitation, sinner that we are', but expressly fears this "missing" book may corrupt many minds to:

> … draw the extreme syllogism, whereby *laughter is man's end*! Laughter, for a few moments, distracts the villain from fear. But law is imposed by fear, whose true name is fear of God. This book could strike the *Luciferine spark* that would set a new fire to the whole world, and laughter would be defined as the new art, unknown even to Prometheus, for cancelling fear. To the villein who laughs, at that moment dying does not matter; but then when the license is passed, the liturgy again imposes on him, according to the divine plan, the fear of death. And from this book there could be born the new destructive aim to destroy

> death through redemption from fear. And what would we be, we sinful creatures, without fear, perhaps the most foresighted, the most loving of the divine gifts? (1980.474, 475)

Jorge's concern is that comedy and laughter distract attention from fear, even from death itself, disrupting submission to God's rules, thereby diminishing fear of God, even casting the devil in a better light by portraying him as merely poor and foolish, in contrast to the very real fear and perceived power which he held over the medieval imagination (explicit in the medieval doom painting above the Chancel arch in St. Thomas' Church Salisbury). In Jorge's view, if such licence to laughter is the *delight of the plebians*, then: "the licence of the plebians must be restrained and humiliated, and intimidated by sternness." Jorge fears such laughter: "an instrument against the serious of the spiritual shepherds (bishops, clergy and religious) who must lead them to eternal life and rescue them from the seduction of belly, pudenda, food, their sordid desires" (1980.475). Lastly, Jorge's greatest fear is:

> But if one day somebody, brandishing the words of Philosopher (Aristotle) and this speaking as a philosopher, were to raise the art of laughter to the condition of subtle weapon, if the rhetoric of conviction were to be replaced by the rhetoric of mockery, if the topic of the patient construction of the images of redemption were to be replaced by the topic of the "impatient dismantling and upsetting" of every holy and venerable image … all … would be swept away. (1980.476)

Jorge fears not only the loss of God's law, but the very fear of God himself, also that power which death holds over people's imagination with regard to either salvation or damnation, seen as properly held by the Church in God's name. Comedy in this (lost) Aristotelian model imagined by Eco, indicates such laughter at the moment of death shows that dying does not matter, that death does not have the last word. Death is therefore belittled and destroyed through laughter's redemptive power from fear of it, confronting and overwhelming death face to face. So I suggest, rather than death being 'the most loving of the divine gifts'; just imagine if it were to prove to be laughter instead! Such laughter, reflecting God's laughter, could indeed be 'the most loving of the divine gifts', and, seen in the light of the resurrection of Jesus and the hope of heaven, is indeed a 'word against death', effectively banishing the very fear of death, something Kuschel describes as: '*to destroy death through redemption from fear*' (1994.31; author's italics). Here the seriousness of opponents, in this case death, can be dispelled with such laughter; which I suggest can be a very subtle weapon indeed to

deploy!

Eco has put into the mouth of his medieval figures many of the insights of present-day psychology and sociology regarding laughter, here perceived as the *re-channeling of aggression*, offering both psychological relief and social relief. Even for the serious-minded opponents of laughter within the Christian context, surely it can function as a 'lesser evil', on the basis that it is better to laugh at the divinely willed order for a while, than to want to change it. We can envisage how festivals, carnivals, and annual fairs had a function in helping to stabilize medieval society, offering temporary release from the day-to-day drudgery and hardship of life by psychological ventilation. They allowed the subversive power of the medieval popular culture of laughter limited respite to be directed against the prevailing status quo, be they feudal lords and laws, or the Church and its clerical hierarchy.

For Kuschel the *Liberation of the Luciferine spark* in human laughter enables people to become masters of their own fate, noting: 'the art of laughter is *at the same time the art of annihilating anxiety.* Where does the annihilation of anxiety lead? It leads to the annihilation of death!' (1994.32). Perhaps we can understand Jorge's logic and determined concern to control this laughter in the name of the Church, its power and authority. But Kuschel points out the inherent dangers involved, suggesting the annihilation of death: ‘leads to *the* abandonment of belief in redemption, to the abolition of any binding truth’ (a post-modern preoccupation), precisely Jorge’s fear that such: ‘Human laughter, the “rhetoric of mockery”, if pursued consistently, leads to a loss of the function of the church, indeed to the abolition of God’ (1994.32). From the Church's point of view, whether in the context of the medieval world or post-modernity, this would be very dangerous territory indeed!

Ingvild Gilhus considers both Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, and Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World*, have been influential contributions towards the creation of the modern mythology of laughter, given that both stress the positive value of laughter, and illustrate how well this mythology fits with modernity. However, she believes both show how important religious themes remain within our culture, even when detached from religious institutions (1997.103), noting Bakhtin's research into carnivalesque fantasy became an influential factor in Eco's novel, in which Eco: 'has a constitutive semiotic perspective and has oppositional laughter as a main theme' (1997.107). Gilhus comments: 'Eco's book is not so much about laughter *per se*: laughter is put within a system of signs in a true semiotic project which is an intellectual enterprise cast as a detective novel. When at the end of the novel the book is destroyed, the reader realizes

that no ultimate signifier exists' (1997.107).

Whilst for Gilhus: 'Eco posits laughter as a sign, a part of a puzzle, a phenomenon of the mind', Bakhtin's text is one anchored primarily in the body in a modernist approach. She feels Eco's work a clear transition to the postmodern, where: 'laughter no longer points to the meaning of the body, but to the transitory play of the mind', becoming more a: 'triumph of the intellect', which (unlike Bakhtin): 'has no belief in the final liberating effect of carnival' (1997.108). She suggests for Eco: 'Laughter is a sign appearing in texts, interplaying with a myriad of other signs. These signs are all ultimately meaningless in the sense that none of them points to a principle of absolute truths or has any foundation in an ultimate reality' (1997.108). Gilhus considers on the positive side:

> When these authors made connections between religion and laughter, they not only strengthened a secular belief in the liberating effects of laughter, they also encouraged religious belief in the same conviction. Thereby, both works support a tendency in contemporary religion to incorporate laughter in some way or another. (1997.109)

Now we have given consideration to Eco's novel and the critiques of it made by Kuschel and Gilhus, I turn to another influential book (originally a doctoral thesis 1940, English translation 1968), by the Russian semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin, in which a mythology of laughter is similarly developed.

Bakhtin on the laughter of Carnival and the Grotesque

Mikhail Bakhtin's (1940) *Rabelais and his World* is concerned with carnival laughter, perceived as an alternative viewpoint to religion when considering the folk culture of the Middle Ages. Bakhtin looks back to Rabelais and his times, finding parallels with his own situation under Stalin, and sourcing his methodology in remembered Russian folk culture familiar from his youth. Bakhtin defines the principle and presence of the carnivalesque in his native literary heritage, enabling him to compare the comical in the epoch prior to the Renaissance with the repressive Soviet regime with its prohibition of laughter under Communism, finding within his radically altered situation a rejection of "subcultures" implemented in the years prior to the Second World War, only subsequently to be replaced by a cultural "centrism" pertaining not only to the social, but also to an ethnic hierarchy (1984.ix).

Bakhtin defines carnivalesque as "laughter through tears" (1984.ix), with carnival seen

as an indispensable component of folk culture, in which a new mode of man's relation to man is elaborated, and "carnivalization" becomes a necessary condition for the ultimate 'structure of life', informed by "behaviour and cognition", with: 'the "unmasking" and disclosure of the unvarnished truth under the veil of false claims and arbitrary ranks' (1984.x). Bakhtin sees the Socratian dialogue as a prototype of discursive mechanism for revealing truth, with dialogue conceived as opposed to the "authoritarian word", just as carnival opposes official culture. Bakhtin notes how Rabelais: 'uses the popular-festive system of images... to inflict a severe punishment on his foe, the Gothic age' (1984.268), in which carnival festivities, and the comic spectacles and ritual connected with them, had an important place in the life of medieval man, noting:

> Besides carnivals proper, with their long and complex pageants and processions, there was the "feast of fools" (*festa stultorum*) and the "feast of the ass"; there was a special free "Easter laughter" (*risus paschalis*), consecrated by tradition. Moreover, nearly every Church feast had its comic folk aspect, which was also traditionally recognized … [when] a carnival atmosphere reigned on days when mysteries and *soties* were produced. Civil and social ceremonies and rituals took on a comic aspect as clowns and fools, constant participants in these festivals, mimicked serious rituals. (1984.4, 5)

Bakhtin considers all these forms of protocol and ritual were based on laughter and consecrated by tradition, existing in all the countries of Medieval Europe as sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonies, offering a completely different, non-official, extra-ecclesiastical and extra-political aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations, building a second world and a second life outside the bounds of officialdom; a world in which all medieval people participated, and in which they lived during the given time of the year when feast and carnival took place (1984.5,6). Bakhtin notes: 'All these forms of carnival were also linked externally to the feasts of the Church' (1984.7), in which: 'moments of death and revival, of change and renewal always led to a festive perception of the world' (1984.9). 'The official feasts of the Middle Ages, whether ecclesiastic, feudal, or sponsored by the state, did not lead the people out of the existing world order and created no second life. On the contrary, they sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it' (1984.9). Noting folk humour is ambivalent, Bakhtin thinks:

> The satirist whose laughter is negative places himself above the object of his mockery, he is opposed to it. The wholeness of the world's comic aspect is

> destroyed, and that which appears comic becomes a private reaction. The people's ambivalent laughter, on the other hand, expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it. (1984.12)

Gilhus, noting Bakhtin's theme is the connection between Rabelais' Renaissance novel and the Medieval laughter culture, recognises:

> At the book's centre stands the carnival and the material body, which is conceived in terms of food, drink, defecation and sexual life. The carnivalesque body is not expressed in any individual body, but in the collectivity of the people. It is pictured as an enormous grotesque, characterized by brimming abundance, always opening up to the world, at the same time swallowing up and giving birth. … Radically new in Bakhtin is how the connection between laughter, the carnivalesque body and bodily openings are elaborated in a positive direction and develop existential meaning. (1997.103, 104)

Thus Bakhtin's work establishes the significance of laughter as a cultural force, described as cathartic and salvific: 'an expression of rebellion aimed at the religious authorities and their institutions, past and present', where the forms and rituals based on laughter had been systematically placed outside the life of the Church, of officialdom and politics, Bakhtin noting: 'Festivity is a peculiar quality of all comic rituals and spectacles of the Middle Ages' (1968.8). Bakhtin describes the complex nature of carnival laughter as firstly, a festive laughter, a laughter of all the people, not just an individual reaction to some isolated 'comic' event; secondly, as universal in scope, directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants; thirdly, that: 'this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives' (1968.11-12).

Gilhus considers Bakhtin, through his conception of carnival, ascribes religious significance to laughter, but she is critical of his interpretation of religion and history as too indebted to the anthropological thinking of the time his book was written (1940), displays a rather nostalgic dwelling on the past, particularly his view of modernity as a fall, which looks back to an earlier idealized age, and imagines a glorification of the Middle Ages too readily, to some paradise lost, now impossible to reach within the modern world (1997.105). Gilhus finds his description of religion in the Middle Ages unconvincing, his description of festival laughter as a vivid portrayal of utopian laughter of carnival and of the body being too strictly in opposition to the ruling religious culture,

noting:

> The feasts of the people and the feasts of the Church were not so distinctive from each other, nor could the division between body and soul be conceived of in an absolute dualistic perspective. On the contrary ... the body in Catholic Christianity was a means to reach the soul and it was an object of salvation. (1997.106)

Gilhus considers that Bakhtin bridged the distance between the old culture of signs and its modern counterpart, semiotics, a great utopian attempt to reclaim the body amidst all the modern forces which had gradually led to subduing the body, establishing the body as the ultimate signifier, and laughter as its key symbol. Thus Gilhus considers:

> Bakhtin created a significant symbolic connotation for laughter in the late twentieth century – the human body as a mythological construction. … The fact that Bakhtin chose laughter as the preferred expression of the bodily material principle is typical of laughter's position in late modernity, which is rather paradoxical: on the one hand, laughter is treated as a phenomenon of the mind, thus giving it a new status. On the other hand, in Bakhtin's mythological context, laughter is a symbol of the life in the body, thus making laughter a seemingly simple channel into an immensely complex reality. Laughter becomes utopian. (1997.106, 107)

Bakhtin in the art and literature of past ages observes two types of phenomenon, the grotesque and the classic, noting how both these canons experienced various forms of interaction, but indicating these were never fixed and immutable (1984.30). He notes: ‘In Rabelais' work images of the human body are emphasized with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life playing a predominant role’ (1984.18). In grotesque realism the bodily element is deeply positive, and its essential principle is degradation and debasement' (1984.19). Here Bakhtin provides an important work of recovery and reconstruction regarding laughter and humour, demonstrating the aesthetic rooted in the earthiness of carnival he found in the writings of Rabelais.

Perhaps that very sense of the absurd and of the grotesque, where there are no fixed points or certainties, has now been recovered through the influence and outworking of the concepts of post-modernity in our present-day society. They can certainly be recovered in the film work of Monty Python, where the carnivalesque and grotesque are readily apparent. Perhaps in cinema going, too, it could be argued that we are

individually lifted out of day-to-day humdrum and routine and our private "chambers", when, as part of a wider audience, we may recreate the collectively shared ‘carnival life’ experience Bakhtin's work sought to recover. Here reality can again be suspended in time and place, all things are made possible, and (with the Monty Python team's encouragement and zany humour), we, too, can stare into the abyss, look on the face of death, and laugh at it. For both film and laughter can also provide us with suitable 'words against death' to face our fears and anxieties, and banish any particular individual *boggart* (derived from J. K. Rowling’s *Harry* Potter novels) concerning death back safely into the wardrobe, and with *Monty Python's* hapless 'Brian', to '*Always look on the bright side of Life*'.

Returning briefly to Davies’ theme of ‘words against death’, in 2009 Davies and Chang-Won Park hosted a Durham University symposium entitled *Death, Dying and Disposal* in Durham Castle, focusing on issues surrounding death, especially emotion, which resulted in the publication (2012) of *Emotion, Identity and Death: Mortality Across Disciplines,* with Davies and Park as editors. Tim Bullamore in *The Postmodern Obituary: Why Honesty Matters* noted how traditional newspaper obituaries tended to paint an unrealistic portrait of a life, often presenting either a eulogised picture of the deceased, or mere hagiography and *curriculum vitae*. This changed around 1986 when various obituary editors (Hugh Massingberd *Daily Telegraph*, Fergusson *The Independent*, John Grigg *The Times*) began writing more humorous, irreverent and indiscreet or directly honest obituaries, as well as more personal recollections of the life that had ended, and the post-modern obituary was born. These have contained greater candour, humour, and honesty than before, sometimes poking fun gently at eccentricities of otherwise blameless individuals, but overall giving a more rounded appreciation and understanding of the character in question. Bridget Fowler (2004) noted four genres; traditional positive, negative, ironic, and tragic, although Bullamore considers this as too simplistic (2012.8-11). Either way, the post-modern obituary has brought humour to bear in the face of death, providing further evidence for the practical use and application of humour and laughter as ‘words against death’.

Having examined the present-day role of laughter and its function in modernity and post-modernity, we move to a theological consideration of the link between laughter and theology in the modern age, and how it impacts on religion as seen from the perspective of various theologians. To recap briefly, complex historical and cultural processes worked together to limit laughter in religious life over the centuries, and even after the Reformation divisions, some reformers’ attitude had much in common with what had dominated the life of the early Church, and remained evident in some

Catholic circles. This attitude came to be challenged by events in the wider society, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the rise of Colonialism and Empire, and the development of international global trade, all resulting through modernity in greater cross-cultural awareness, knowledge, and understanding, particularly over the last century. I suggest this together with the impact of post-modernity, has had a positive impact on the way that laughter has been perceived, even now extending into the religious life. The faith and witness of the wider Christian Church and community now embraces not only inter-denominational dialogue, but inter-faith dialogue too, in the ongoing search for common ground and greater understanding between the individual faith communities. In this trust, I believe friendship, humour and laughter, expressing our common humanity, have an important role to play.

In modern Western societies, Gilhus considers religious aspects of laughter became incorporated into twentieth-century secular culture, a two-way process whereby laughter was similarly introduced into contemporary religious culture (1997.12,13), an interplay between religion and laughter wherein lies: 'a conception of laughter ... seen as a positive contributor to human liberation, spiritual growth and wisdom. Laughter relieves tension, vanquishes rigidity and helps to cultivate a playful attitude toward life' (1997.102). The reintroduction of laughter into the Church appears to be a modern if not post-modern phenomenon, whereby Western contemporary culture has influenced the Church, rather than vice-versa, with laughter and humour spilling over into Church life in a way unthinkable a few decades ago. I suggest the semiotics of Bakhtin and Eco, when taken together with modernist and post-modernist views regarding the place and role of laughter, have all positively affected Western culture, and influenced the perception of laughter within both Church and other faith groups, bringing the possibility of reincorporating laughter, humour, and a proper sense of joy back into religious life again. Gilhus believes: ‘This new laughter is dependent on the general cultural value now ascribed to laughter, and on its combinations with religion in secular culture’ (1997.109). Whilst Christian kill-joys may still have reservations, Gilhus emphasises the importance and acceptance of the body in any consideration of laughter.

Gilhus detects three themes present in the late twentieth-century alliance between Christianity and laughter: firstly, the cosmic ideal: the playful god; secondly, the soteriological ideal: Jesus as clown; and thirdly, the anthropological ideal: the laughing Christian, noting that these are interconnected. These themes have, of course, developed over many years, involving dialogue with the canonical Christian texts, and influenced by commentaries written by theologians from the Church Fathers to the Middle Ages. She considers this new Christian laughter appears at the point of

intersection between texts, but suggests its impulses come from outside institutional religion (1997.110).

Regarding the cosmic ideal, Gilhus notes: 'In contemporary Christianity, the idea of a laughing Christ is more promising than that of a laughing god', and, as a theme in theology, a laughing god has only been touched upon sporadically. Hugo Rahner's work (1965) developed the modern concept and theme of *homo ludens,* into one of *Deus ludens,* 'the playful god', seeing this as anchored in the tradition of Divine Wisdom (originally developed in the inter-testamental period, and Book of Proverbs) (Rahner 1965:5-9). Gilhus comments: 'When Rahner appealed to a god who laughs, he wisely referred to this hypostatized entity of wisdom, in this case a substitute for God' (1997.110). Looking at the soteriological ideal of Jesus as clown, Gilhus thinks Jesus can be presented as a type of comic hero – even a clown figure (1997.111), but this alternative approach has its detractors, and is dependent on contemporary secular conceptions of the clown and of 'fools for Christ's sake'. Whilst Gilhus notes: 'it is difficult to make a theology of laughter on the concept of a 'witty' Jesus', Kuschel considers: 'A far more convincing Christian theology of laughter takes as its point of departure an alternative perspective on Christianity as a comic gospel aimed at liberation and unlimited joy (1994:65-93). For Gilhus: 'The vision of Jesus as a comical hero ... opened the door for the laughing Christian' (1997.112). Regarding the anthropological ideal of the laughing Christian, Gilhus draws upon Harvey Cox's (1969) suggestion that the: 'laughing Christian is a radical recreation of religious man in a secularized world' (1997.113), and notes how both Rahner and Cox argue that it is theologically and existentially desirable for Christians to pursue a witty or comic attitude toward life (1997.114).

James Martin (2011) considers faith should naturally lead us to joy, and a light-hearted approach not simply in life, but into the spiritual life in particular, noting how: 'a self-deprecating joke may be the healthiest brand of humour, since the only target is yourself' (2011.10, 11), quoting Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: 'Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God', and Karl Barth's suggestion: 'Laughter is the closest thing to God's grace' (2011.15). Martin sees joy as generally understood as a kind of happiness, an intensified or long-lasting delight or bliss, and humour as a quality or attribute rather than as an emotion (2011.16), whilst noting how joy, humour, and laughter are interrelated, given that: 'sustained laughter leads to a feeling of joy ... and finding a spirit of joy in your life may help you become a more humorous person' (2011.18).

Peter Waddell (2012) explores the place of joy in the seven traditional sacraments of the Catholic Church, suggesting joy complements the solemnity in which they are often celebrated. By developing the place of joy in the earthly life of Jesus and in the life of the early Church, Waddell considers Jesus' incarnate life was an expression in human terms of the very life of God, a life lived with joy constantly flowing out that would attract others who would want to share that joy in order to live and love more abundantly, just as Jesus did. He asserts that the sacraments are ways in which the joy of Jesus surges into our lives, and that this joy needs to be recovered in our spiritual lives and celebrations of the sacraments. For Waddell, all Christian theology depends on Jesus, who he was, what he did, who he is, and what he does (2012.xiv), and that the sacraments, which in both symbol and ritual deal with the overwhelming experiences of life and death (2012.35), are precisely how the gospel comes alive, and the joy of Jesus is made known. This may be considered a restrictive view, given the extent of 'joyful' Christians from non-sacramental backgrounds such as the Salvation Army, Unitarians, or Society of Friends, who do not adhere to Waddell's understanding of the sacraments.

Waddell notes how death (relevant in my understanding of 'words against death'), humankind's last and greatest enemy, is the ultimate divider and failure of relationship (although some might argue that time itself is the precursor of death, and that death is not the enemy), whereby: 'the dead have lost the living, and the living have lost the dead, forever', the ultimate mockery of God's hope for Israel (2012.7). For he suggests: 'Death drives us apart from each other and apart from God, it is the great mockery of all joy's purpose. That was why Jesus' mission of joy required the great confrontation with death on Calvary and the tomb' (2012.70). Accordingly, the one who brings and embodies joy will face all that is joy's opponent in his death on the Cross (2012.7). Waddell notes: 'Jesus dies trusting that violent and overwhelming as the dark powers are, there is a deeper truth' (2012.7,8), which is that in that death of Jesus (in whom God's love and joy are embodied, in a power that death cannot overcome and stifle), ultimately Jesus' resurrection will result in joy trumping death (2012.8,9), and must qualify as a 'word against death'. Thus for Waddell: 'Joy streams from Calvary, victorious into all misery and begins to raise the dead, … it begins to raise us from death, and makes our whole being joy' (2012. 25). Such joy itself acts therefore as a 'word against death' in its association with the resurrection.

Waddell notes how: 'The experience [or I suggest perhaps the faith belief] of resurrection in the early Church was of things impossible being made possible by God' (2012.10), which together with the sense of the continuing, lively, and powerful

presence of the risen Jesus, is a central and underlying feature of all subsequent sacramental theology, where Waddell considers the risen life of Jesus rejoices its way into other human lives (2012.12). However, here I might wish to tease out the idea as to whether sacramentalism is an anamnesis for purposes of memory only, or for vivifying a living presence. Here, in generally concurring with Waddell's findings, I note the incarnation and fully human nature of Jesus as the Christ is of the greatest importance to my thesis, given that the ability to laugh is a distinguishing human trait, and common to humankind, whereas the Gospels never mention Jesus laughing. I consider Waddell would agree with the primary importance of the incarnation, for he notes:

> The doctrinal history of the first Christian centuries … established that Jesus Christ had a real human body; next that he had a real human mind and soul; next that his human nature was like in all things except sin …; next, that this meant that he must indeed have had a truly human will. Jesus is certainly more than a mere man, but he is equally certainly in no way less. (2012.64)

Here I note the early Church could do none other than propose a fully human side to Jesus, in contrast to the Gnostics, who saw in Jesus a figure of mysticism, and one to be apprehended at a certain level of consciousness. But it seems to me that the Church, in developing the doctrine of the incarnation (Jesus being fully God and fully human), *requires* Jesus not only to have expressed joy in his life and ministry as Waddell suggests, but possibly to have laughed, since any definition of being ‘fully human’ must include having at times displayed yawning, unrepetitive talking, and various emotions such as fear, rage, and all those other traits common to humanity. This may appear speculative but it should provide a balanced and fuller understanding of the human nature of Jesus.

Waddell reminds us the Church is not just a collection of Christians, but the way in which Jesus lives in the world, because: ‘beyond and behind all hierarchy and ritual and structure, the Church happens when the joy of Jesus – the joy which Jesus is – comes to be the deepest reality of other lives’, something which: ‘is the mystery of Pentecost, the birth of the Church’ (2012.12). He considers that: 'to be a Christian is to share in the joy of Jesus, ... [and that] no power runs deeper and stronger than joy’ (2012.20). Despite the paradox of its many limitations, and the sins, faults, and failures of those called to be the Body of Christ, Waddell asserts that the Church remains the way in which Jesus lives in the world, and one which should reflect his joy, called to be and reflect the place of God’s joy, the deepest heart of whose being is Jesus (2012.14). Accordingly: ‘Jesus is experienced primarily as joy: as the one who brings people to life

through loving them, as the one who longs for Israel and all humanity to live and love abundantly. … Jesus rejoiced to share himself with others so all might rejoice' (2012.16). This is surely a situation where laughter and humour would and should be naturally apparent in both the lives of Christians and in the life of the Church. For Waddell suggests:

> The Christian vision is that (God) creates out of joy. … Being a Christian is about knowing that, and becoming it ever more fully. It is about allowing the joy which streams from the heart of all things to course through us, to subvert and overcome all that is within us and between us stops us from being what we are. It is about the joyless ruins of sin in us being renovated and reformed into the image of God, into lives which breathe joy and grace as purely and naturally as Jesus did – as Jesus does. It is about being woven into Jesus so that his life – that pure rhapsody of joy – plays through ours, through our unique lives and circumstances and freedom, making a joy which is always different and yet always the same. Being woven into his joy is why we have sacraments. (2012.17, 18)

Commenting on Kuschel's work, Martin notes how Kuschel admits the 'conceptual impossibility' of developing a theology of laughter, since there are so many varieties, some praiseworthy, others not, recognising: 'There is joyful, comfortable, playful and contented laughter, ... and there is mocking, malicious, desperate and cynical laughter', and that: 'Like their Master from Nazareth, Christians have to take into account both laughing and being laughed at' (Martin 2011.19).

Laughter cuts across the spectrum of the divisions that divide one religious or faith community from another, providing common ground and a common expression within the religious life. For Martin notes laughter can edify not only within the Jewish and Christian traditions, for a Muslim scholar pointed to several passages in the Qur'an and other Islamic sources: 'that highlight the value of laughter, which finds its source in divinity', for the Qur'an states: 'It is God who causes your laughter and your tears' (Qur'an 53.43). In a collection of sayings relating to the Prophet Muhammad, a witness reports: 'I indeed saw the Messenger of God laugh till his front teeth were exposed' (Sahib Muslim, vol.1, 365), and another relating how God himself laughs: 'So Allah will laugh and allow him [the righteous one] to enter Paradise' (Sahibal-Bukhari, vol. 1,770) (2011.22).

Martin notes: 'The Christian saints and spiritual masters of other traditions were frequently humorous in both their words and deeds and used wit to convey important

teachings to their followers' (2011.23). He thinks Kuschel's two-fold approach to laughter as either good or bad is helpful in looking at humour from a spiritual vantage point, in that: 'there is humour that builds up and humour that tears down, a humour that exposes cant and hypocrisy and a humour that belittles the defenceless and marginalized', also: 'there is a morality to humour', whereby for religious observers, whether humour is 'good' or 'bad' depends not only on a moral sense, but on how humour deepens or cheapens the relationship with God (2011.23). Martin records how joy is an important component in many Eastern religious traditions, quoting Francis Clooney that joy is: “of great significance in Hindu religious sensitivity” (2011.28). Martin says whilst the saints knew there were some serious reasons for humour, such insights are not simply the province of Christian spiritual masters, citing examples from the Talmud, from Islam, Zen Buddhism, and other Eastern traditions. The Muslim scholar and author Sheik Jamal Rahman said to Martin:

> The beloved saints in Islam say that many of us are far too severe with ourselves and take life much too seriously. We need discipline and focus but also flexibility, spaciousness, and lots of laughter. A hidden smile from within knows that what is mortal and transient is also grounded in eternity. Truly all is well. The Persian Mystic Hafiz points out that the Beloved's name is pure joy. The closer we come to Him, the more we are able to hear and feel God's laughter. If we don't laugh, it's because we are not yet blessed with higher awareness. (2011.84)

This indicates to me much common inter-faith ground to be found through the use of humour and laughter, to which I suggest a Christian theology of laughter can contribute, not least in providing a common ground for hope, and also 'words against death' when confronting the reality of death. In developing and applying a Christian theology of laughter. I concur with Gilhus that laughter is a very positive contributor to human liberation, and that where the fear of death predominates, there is a need to find liberation from such fear, in which laughter can help us to face and confront such fears, to relieve tension, and be for us a ‘word against death’. But some might question whether it is possible for laughter to be applied, say, in the case of impending death by execution or accident? What feelings are expressed other than fear? In the tragedy of the moment, is laughter a real option? Yet in Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*, we find that the Scarlet Pimpernel rages against his impending death, but finds solace at his fate in terms of substitution.

Gilhus says: 'This new significance given to laughter and the playful element of life is,

for instance, supported by the psycho-literary tradition', which has explored the body through literature and psychoanalysis, and draws upon Sigmund Freud's reading of culture, particularly his Relief theory, suggesting: 'jokes are seen as safety valves for forbidden thoughts and feelings, especially of sexuality and violence; they are keys to secret hidden depths of human existence. The body is made to speak through its laughter and laughter in its turn invites interpretation' (1997.102, 103). What is true of laughter as a safety valve with regard to forbidden thoughts and feelings, and concerning sexuality and violence, I believe applies equally to death, and laughter as a ‘word against death’. Beverly Clack (2002) establishes the important link and interplay that exists between sex, sexuality, and death, each of which is frequently seen as a taboo subject in polite society, but in each case, the body is intimately involved, just as in the phenomenon of laughter. A similar emphasis comes from Feminist Theology, where I find certain links and parallels have implications in helping to develop a theology of laughter.

Beverly Harrison (1990), drawing upon Mary Daly’s work (1979), explores the work of anger as an expression of radical love. Whilst Harrison notes how anger is listed as one of the traditional ‘seven deadly sins’ (based on Evagrius), she emphasises Daly’s insistence that no feminist analysis could perpetuate the notion that anger is evil *per se.* Like righteous anger, humour and laughter have similarly been avoided for too long in popular Christian piety, being either perceived as inappropriate, or because, once unleashed, they cannot be controlled within such a body-denying and conservative institution as the Christian Church. Harrison considers that the fear of feeling, and, more specifically, the power of anger, are the cause of moral *escapism* in the Church, and that: ‘Christianity is impaled between a subjectivist and sentimental piety that results from fear of strong feeling, especially strong negative feeling under pretentious conceptual detachment’ (1990.206). There is therefore a gap between our own emotions, and the stance within Christian tradition which privileges a detached ‘cerebral’ approach to spirituality and our relations with one another. Whether one accepts this feminist critique of Western Christian spirituality or not, a valid point is being made here where such detachment from (righteous) anger and deep emotion may effectively paralyze and blunt the Church’s engagement with social and pastoral issues. This focus on spiritual life as being embodied is surely correct, and resonates with my thesis that laughter is an integral part of human connection to God and our fellow travellers along life’s road and journey, where laughter can challenge death’s grip upon our consciences, and be a most effective ‘word against death’, seen most clearly in Jesus’ ‘last laugh’ in the resurrection.

Laughter, too, rooted in our physical bodies and bodily reactions, connects us to the world around us, but traditionally has been disvalued within Christian culture. Establishing and developing a Christian theology of laughter rooted in embodiment may enable us to recognise how its proper use may create those personal bonds between people which Harrison's work suggests, connecting us to other people and the natural environment, whilst building up personhood and community life, communication, caring and nurturance. A developed Christian theology of laughter, in participating and reflecting the divine laughter, brings us back into a restored relationality with the Trinitarian God, both in revealed religion and personal individual faith, as well as the collective shared relationship with others within the Church.

For Harrison: ‘A chief evidence of the grace of God – which always comes to us in, with, and through each other – is this power to struggle and to experience indignation. We should not make light of our power to rage against the dying of the light’ (an image drawn from the poet Dylan Thomas on the death of his father). ‘It is the root of the power of love … acting to keep the power of relationship alive in our world’ (1990.212, 213). Such is the power of anger in the work of love as Harrison perceives it; and, as with so much that she argues for in her theology, I suggest this can equally apply to humour and laughter, which together can all be perceived as a power in the work of love which comes to us from God.

Melissa Jackson (2012), in bringing comic reading of the Hebrew Bible into conversation with feminist-critical interpretation, lists nine instructive points of contact which she suggests strongly *resist definition*, since each incorporates a multiplicity of approaches, manifestations, applications, and structures too complex for simple designation, and that, as with feminism, offers a simple definition of the comic that is neither possible or desirable (2012.235-247). Jackson speaks in terms of distancing in a feminist critique of affirming identification – and comedy affirming distance. She uses revelation conceptually in understanding the death of another, where finally comes the idea of *survival*, where Jackson suggests: ‘Comedy engages a threat and lessens it by ridiculing it, weakening that threat’s control. Thus, humour opens up a means to survive the threat through catharsis and/or escape, even if only temporarily’, and that … ‘Comedy innately believes that life goes on’ (2012.246). This is precisely the role of humour and laughter when employed as a ‘word against death’. Jackson lends further support to my supposition when she suggests:

> First comedy weakens the control of that which threatens by ridiculing it. ‘The comic may not immediately change reality but it does alter the community’s

> relationship to reality by reducing fear' (Quoting O'Connor *Humor, Turnabouts and Survival,* 63, 64). Comedy, as it reduces threat through ridicule, 'frees us from paralysis and mobilizes courage' (Berggrav, *Humor and Seriousness*, 207). Second, comedy provides a catharsis and/or an escape from the threat, even if it is only a temporary one. … Third, comedy facilitates the rise of hope through offering, in story form, a promise that survival in the 'real' world is indeed possible. (2012.247)

Such 'words against death' can enable us to find laughter and humour amidst life's tragedy, deploying what Jackson describes as: 'comedy's revelatory, corrective, survivalist, subversive nature to do its work, revealing, correcting, surviving, and subverting with the hope', all functions which enables us to carry on with life, come what may (2012.250).

Kuschel describes: 'Joyful laughter as a form of life, as an art of survival', countering the destructive influences of modern life which impinge upon many who: 'fall victim to their drives, their potential for destruction through modern technology, their neurotic impulses towards fulfilment, their ivory-tower intellectualism, their moral unscrupulousness' (1994.94). He considers: Laughter would be a way of non-regressive reconciliation with one's own finitude and divided nature' (1994.95). Kuschel thinks Sigmund Freud's 1905 study of *Jokes and their Relation to the Subconscious* useful in providing some basic thoughts about the psycho-social function of jokes, and of how liberating the power of the joke can be, particularly within an institution like the Church. Like Freud, he notes that, as with laughter:

> The joke is similarly a form of co-existence with a world under whose contradictions we suffer without really being able to change them. It can reduce anxiety without completely removing it, express forbidden things without fully breaking with the dominant structure of the world, provide relief without making everything a matter of indifference. The joke sharply brings out the discrepancy between what is and what should be, being and appearance, reality and fiction. … In short, the joke sets the narrative scene for the cheerful acceptance of sorrow about the antinomies and aporias of existence, a form of non-regressive reconciliation with the contradictions in ourselves and the creation in which we live. In telling jokes one detaches oneself from a fixation on the merely problematical and shows the possibility of taking the poison out of an oppressive situation in the act of laughing and in this way coping with it

> psychologically. (1994.103)

These important understandings highlight how laughter, including jokes, can qualify to be 'words against death', and where laughter relaxes and removes tension, Kuschel describes it as: 'the weapon of the defenceless, who moan but are half content with their lot' (1994.105,106). Of course, jokes about death, illness, or handicap can be regarded as 'macabre', where Kuschel notes that 'macabre': 'always has associations with death, of something gruesome and dark, horrific and oppressive' (1994.122).

Kuschel feels a theology of laughter is obligated to the humanity of Jesus, but that further criticism and illumination is to be found in the New Testament Letter of James, 4.10, which seeks to restore dignity to all who are treated in a derogatory way by the dominant society, even if that society is to be found embedded in the church community. Kuschel feels the author of the epistle of James is: 'evidently dealing with a situation of moral unconcern, libertinism and cheerful heedlessness' from the opening verses of that chapter. To such he writes: 'Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to dejection. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you' (James 4.9-10). Kuschel notes:

> It is clear that this statement cannot be exploited for a medieval 'theology of tears', ... this is a deliberate critique of profligacy and heedlessness which is expressed quite openly in laughter. Here 'laughter' is a symbol of blindness and lack of concern, of self-assurance and social coldness; 'mourning' is a symbol of humility, modesty and social sensitivity'. So in James the criticism of laughter is above all a criticism of moral and social conditions, not of laughter *per se.* (1994.126)

Having traced the history of laughter in Church history from the early theologians through to the present day, and here having considered laughter and humour in modernity and post-modernity, and having noted the developing links between laughter and theology in the modern age, and highlighted the need for its recovery and rehabilitation within the religious and Church life, witness, and worship, we now move to look at insights regarding the role of laughter from sociological studies, the significance of liberation theology with regard to laughter and humour, and the work of Jaqueline Bussie on the 'laughter of the oppressed' drawn from three contemporary post-modern novels.

CHAPTER SIX: THE SOCIOLOGY OF HUMOUR AND LAUGHTER, THE THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION, AND THE VOICE OF THE VOICELESS EXPRESSED IN LITERATURE

'Against the assault of laughter nothing stands' (Mark Twain *Letters from the Earth* 1962.258).

The Sociology of Humour and Laughter

In earlier centuries, consideration and discussion concerning humour and laughter were mainly encompassed within the perspective of philosophy and theology, but increasingly, over the last century, they have been examined within the context of sociology. By way of background, I have already drawn an overview (p.7, above) from Giselinde Kuipers' (2008) paper entitled *The Sociology of Humor.* This chapter reviews insights from various other works and related material which have a bearing on sociological perspectives, which are then applied to an examination of the three novels which form the research focus of Jacqueline Bussie's work on '*The Laughter of the Oppresssed*' (2007), where a sociological view of humour and how it applies to people in politically oppressive situations has implications for my thesis.

Firstly, I must further define sociology as it applies to humour and laughter. Sociology can delve into the reality of statistical analysis, sample frames and the functions and aspirations of individuals in gathered communities. I wish to explore how a social science can find an expression in literature; even questioning whether humour and laughter is detectable in both fiction and more serious literature. Any such humour and laughter detectable in the works of fiction is the telling of stories of human ingenuity and pathos, either masked by humour and laughter, or exemplifying basic traits within social interaction.

Anton Zyderveld (1983) traces his study through from Sigmund Freud's philosophical and psychological approach in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1976), to the sociology of knowledge formulated by Berger and Luckmann (1967), an overarching concept encompassing wit, mirth, and the comic. He indicates (Bergson's suggestion concerning the comic aspects of life) that laughter and humour are a phenomenon which is not usually expressed in isolation, requiring a sociological and cultural context, as clearly demonstrated in numerous examples throughout my thesis. For Zyderveld, the sociology of knowledge presents the ideal frame of reference, doing justice to both the playfulness and the profundity of humour, which he defines as: 'playing with institutionalized meanings' (1983.6, 8). Zyderveld suggests that: 'In situations of social and political conflict, humour is doomed to remain playful banter, while the laughter it elicits has the tendency to transcend all ideological boundaries' (1983.9). He notes how: 'Black humour mercilessly violates taboos that we have banished to the fringes of our consciousness - sexual intercourse, fatal illness, death etc. - [which] are surrounded by taboos which have deeply penetrated our emotional lives' (1983.15). Zyderveld highlights a study of Irish humour undertaken by Vivien

Mercier, in which the macabre was generally seen as related to death, and the grotesque to sexuality, but as something which both types of humour were able to neutralise and make bearable, in a situation where the fear of death and the mystery of sexuality attempt: 'to accept death and belittle life' (1983.16), what I identify here as ‘words against death’.

Zyderveld considers laughter to be an autonomous expression which may or may not be part of a humorous interaction, functioning in the way and role it plays in daily communicative behaviour (1983.26). He notes that Freud saw it as a mechanism by which psychic energy is discharged, a view subsequently further developed by Plessner (1941) in suggesting that both laughing and crying lie on the borderline of the conscious and meaningful, and the unconscious and physical (1983.27,28). For Zyderveld, humour and laughter are essential to the mechanics of social life, whose liberating effects Bergson had identified as providing relief from psychological, social and political pressures. Here Zyderveld sees humour as a potential disguised rebellion against the status quo, but as an outlet that does not in itself threaten a system but acts as a metaphorical 'safety valve' which signifies both revolutionary and conservative moods, functioning both to deny and to liberate (1983.30).

For Zyderveld, humour acts as both a counterpoint and a mirror, in that: 'societies are never fully integrated. Even in a society with a dominant value system one would sooner or later discover more or less hidden, competing values, which express dissatisfaction and opposition' (1983.42). He notes how: 'the jester – the rare and lonely critic of an absolutist regime', acts as a safety valve within a repressive system as: 'the voice of powerless people in the absence of democracy, or the moral conscience of an all too powerful and greedy monarch' (1983.42). Zyderveld cites the example of the American-Czech sociologist Antonin Obrdlik who stayed on in Czechoslovakia for some nine months after the German invasion during the Second World War, noting:

> While the German occupation forces were gradually tightening their grip, he focused attention on the varieties and different stages of humour. The jokes in circulation were … “gallows humour”. People in danger often engage in cynical humour, but when the danger is of a political nature, these jokes often carry an element of hope – that the oppression will one day end. These jokes apparently had a psychological and sociological function. They created, above all, the illusion that the down-trodden nation somehow still possessed a degree of independence and power – a moral independence and power which would

eventually conquer the enemy. (1983.48)

Obrdlik pointed out that the oppressor who allows such defiant humour and laughter is obviously still in full command of the situation, whereas the moment he begins to curb such derision, he is losing grip on power. Zyderveld suggests that humour and laughter can provide a very influential mechanism, whereby: 'On a macro-sociological level humour and laughter may function as catalysts in situations of social, cultural, and political conflict' (1983.53), by providing a collective sense of identity, suggesting this: 'is an important variable in the humorous dynamics of conflict' (1983.54). Zyderveld points out that whilst laughter can be derisive and aggressive, it can also be communicative and compassionate, both of which have a function within the fabric of social life, where humour's most important function might be to de-ideolise and instil disillusion (1983.58). He notes: 'Humour carries an enigmatic quality: it is itself unrealistic and thereby able to demonstrate that reality as we know and live it could well be otherwise; that alternatives, as unreal and absurd as they may seem to be, are not unthinkable' (1983.58).

Michael Billig (2005) argues humour is central to social life, and that without the possibility of laughter, serious social life could not be sustained (2005.5). Billig complains the modern tendency of accentuating positive and warm-hearted aspects of humour in contemporary considerations of the psychology of humour is unbalanced, and that eliminating negative aspects such as the role of ridicule, sarcasm, and mockery should be resisted. He argues that the negative needs to be reasserted, noting: ‘the demands of negativity do not exclude the possibility of humour’, albeit that: ‘the pleasures or ridicule … might offend the ideology of being positive’ (2005.11). In this chapter some of those negative aspects will come to the fore, especially when examining the type of laughter that is neither humorous nor comic.

Billig notes how the philosopher Henri Bergson in *Laughter* (1900/1911): ‘put the disciplinary functions of ridicule at the heart of humour and, as such, *Laughter* represents the first real social theory of laughter placed within a philosophical context’ (2005.125). However, he considers Bergson’s observations of humour to be essentially negative, and suggest something more troubling, in that Bergson perceives humour as having a cold cruelty at its core, and far from being intrinsically warm-hearted and positive, despite its necessary social functions for social life, or *surplus* (2005.125). Bergson highlights the disciplinary function which laughter fulfils in helping to discourage inelasticity, where: ‘rigidity is the comic, and laughter is the corrective’ (1911.21), in that people dread being laughed at, which is: ‘always rather humiliating

for the one against whom it is directed', and described as: 'the punishment in the class-room of life' (1911.135). Billig comments: 'Without laughter, social life would fall prey to rigidity; it would ossify. That is why cruelty of ridicule is necessary' (2005.128). Interestingly, N.R. Norrick in *Conversational Joking* (1993) also notes the negative role of mockery and sarcasm, which he considers seems to be geared for: 'animosity rather than rapport' (1993.43, 44).

Billig notes how Sigmund Freud's theory of repression depicts laughter's role as the means by which unruly human nature is socially disciplined, thus giving it a crucial sociological dimension. Freud's developmental theory of the Oedipus Complex suggests the roots of the underlying psychological imperative come from early conditioning within the family. Billig considers that in his case study of Little Hans, Freud was not interested in how the parents exerted discipline, and how patterns of repression might be reproduced across the generations, nor indeed of how the remembrance of the laughter of mockery might: 'not constitute the return of the repressed but the return of the repressive' (2005.146-149).

With regard to Freud's theory of jokes, Freud makes an important point when he suggests some jokes – the tendentious ones – avoid social prohibitions, in that they permit speakers to say things that would otherwise be forbidden, where humour can be a means of evading the inevitable restrictions of social life, and permit brief moments of shared freedom, an insight which will be an important consideration in reviewing Bussie's 'laughter of the oppressed', where I argue the laughter occasioned by a joke aimed against an oppressor can be expressed as the voice of rebellion, and as such celebrating and expressing the unbroken spirit of the powerless (see also Billig 2005.156). Laughter can be a means of subverting and overcoming the logic of the status quo, which by focusing on the foolish and absurd aspects of the oppression and oppressors, may enable the oppressed to envisage turning the tables on their oppressors, who may thereby be encouraged to rebel against their supposedly inferior status, a situation where Billig remarks: 'the audience is expected to know why the teller (of jokes) should wish aggression upon the particular target and to share that aggressive wish. Such jokes can be called "pure aggression" jokes since they play with the idea of violence not with stereotypes' (2005.167). He considers Freud's vision sees humour to be on the side of the powerless, suggesting: 'it teases the world delightfully; it challenges authority and evades restriction … (it) distances the joker from the exigencies of the world, but it does little to distance those exigencies from the world' (2005.168). Freud, with his long-held belief that psychoanalytic theory might be translatable into a physiological theory of nervous energy (the relief theory of Bain and

Spencer), in concentrating upon the rebelliousness of laughter, ignores its disciplinary tendencies (which was Bergson's central argument), seeing it in a purely physiological way which avoids assuming the existence of tendentious motives (see Billig 2005.169).

Billig stresses that in communicating meaning, the rhetorical nature of laughter (whilst contestable) may help us to understand why humour might be paradoxical, and how the dynamics of humour indicate it has potential power to disrupt order, as well as the power to impose it, since: 'laughter can be used to communicate appreciation and amusement,… (or) conveying disapproval and unamusement', suggesting a corresponding rhetoric of 'unlaughter' displays a control and restraint when laughter might otherwise be expected, hoped for, or demanded (2005.180,192). He notes: 'Laughter does not possess a single rhetorical force even within the context of humour. It can be the laughter of hostile ridicule or the laughter of friendly appreciation: one can laugh *with* others and *at* others, … and can be both social and anti-social' (2005.194). Picking up on Bergson's suggestion that laughter needs an echo, Billig's criticism of the weakness of the three classic theoretical approaches to laughter focuses on their individualistic approach rather than the wider social setting in which laughter occurs, whereby: 'the primary purpose of laughter or "unlaughter" is to communicate with others', suggesting humour is not, and cannot be, a solitary discovery, noting how G.A. Fine (1983) emphasises how the corporate nature of humour can help to sustain the morale and cohesion of groups (2005.195).

Whilst Billig is concerned with turning negatives into positives, he acknowledges the shadow side of ridicule remains, in which rhetoric can be reversed from positive into the negative in situations where laughter can hurt and divide, where ridicule may be more hurtful than hatred. Peter Berger (1997) suggests that whilst benign humour: 'is the most common expression of the comic in everyday life, the importance of derogatory humour cannot be overlooked, since ridicule lies at the heart of humour' (Billig, 2005.196). According to A.H.Buss (1980): 'one of the prime means of socialisation is through teasing, laughter, and ridicule' (1980.232).

To summarise, Billig believes a critical approach to humour needs to encompass all these so-called negative aspects, which he considers tend to be overlooked or lost in the loose assumptions of ideological positivism, such as the nature of ridicule, which he notes from the time of Plato onwards, was one of the few permitted forms of humour, and is one that lies at the centre of Bergson's analysis (2005.175).

The sociologist Douglas Davis (1993, not to be confused with the anthropologist and

theologian Douglas Davies) considers whilst humour can disintegrate cultural systems (particularly linguistic, logical, and anthropological ones), it can also disintegrate social systems, and consequently threaten the integrity of the self itself, in that it: 'laughs at the same phenomena sociology investigates, … [and that] like comedy, sociology also focuses on social types which reinforce customary stereotypes', and thereby: 'may cross cut and consequently undermine them' (1993.149,150). He considers not all social systems are naturally given, but are socially *constructed,* asserting: 'If social [and cultural] systems have been constructed, they can also be "deconstructed", (and that [citing Pirandello]) ... humor can tear apart all these illusory human constructions', since both sociology and comedy unmask and thereby profane powerful individuals, groups, roles, and institutions (1993.154). Anton Zijderveld in a paper entitled *Jokes and their Relation to Social Reality* (1968) considers that: 'both of them [sociology and humour] are forbidden in dictatorially ruled countries. Dictators, conspicuously devoid of a real sense of humour and fond of socio-political ideologies, shun sociological analysis and hate political satire' (1968.288). Davis comments: 'Consequently both the political comics and social critics of authoritarian countries must retreat to ironic communication to avoid public censure', and that: 'Anomaly and actuality ... are comedy's chief weapons against *social* systems' (1993.158). Finally, Davis notes how:

> Comedy negates organisation, structure, form, even clarity itself. Comedy attacks not merely the conception of social structure, … but the more general conception of structure itself, … weakening the legitimacy of the dominant conceptual structure, which permits other potential ways to organise the world. ... Thus comedicity challenges those who presume the world has a particular organisation, structure, or form, … (and) those who presume its processes have priority. … Comedy deconstructs these humanly constructed organisations back to their elements through negation. (1993.309, 310)

In summary, Davis's sociological approach to comedy may be combined with that of Zyderveld in his approach to laughter, for he similarly views its role and function as including the transcending of ideological boundaries. This brings us to consider another approach to societal power, which the theological critique of society and the Church known as 'liberation theology' seeks to address. The two main proponents of this 'liberation theology' that we now consider are Gustavo Gutiérrez and Jon Sabrino.

Liberation Theology

Liberation theology aims to give a voice to the voiceless, whose voice is silenced by politico-economic oppression, and was developed within Latin America as a 'bottom-up' approach to the view of the Church as community-based and not hierarchically structured in its authority and interpretation of the Church's teaching. Its origins can be traced to the establishment in 1955 of a Latin American Episcopal Council of Roman Catholic Bishops (better known as CELAM). Based in Colombia, CELAM pushed the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) toward a more progressive stance, and at their 1968 Medellín Conference, the bishops officially supported "base ecclesiastic communities", and the liberation theology propounded by Gustavo Gutiérrez in his 1972 essay, “A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation”. It is to such Latin American liberation theologians as Gustavo Gutiérrez, and Jon Sobrino in *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach* (1981), that we find the intellectual mainstream of liberation theology in their producing a theology of the voiceless. Underlying these works is the perception that, in the context of Latin America, traditional (Western) theological models and concepts, which had emerged out of European history, thought and experience, were now inadequate in the particular 'New World' circumstances, countries in which either right-wing dictatorships, or left-wing Marxist regimes held sway, in frequently oppressive circumstances. However, liberation theology has not been without its detractors and critics because of its perceived links with Marxism, especially within Vatican circles, and it could be argued that a need for a liberation theology is a more localised phenomenon, presented to suggest that it only has sociological relevance due to circumstances in a particular place, rather than being applicable to the wider Catholic Church with a universal application.

The early protagonists of liberation theology were theologians and catechists working with the poor in the slums of South America, interpreting the biblical word and theological discourse through lived experience at the grass roots, rather than giving critique to existing European thinking ‘from above’, thereby seeking to offer an intellectual framework for what was already bringing hope to the oppressed peoples of the shanty-towns in which they were ministering (see Anthony Towey 2013.366, 367). Gustavo Gutiérrez is arguably regarded as its founding father, by identifying in *The Power of the Poor* (1983) its origins in the: ‘premature and unjust death of many people' (regarded by the powerful as non-persons), and considers: 'The question in Latin America will not be how to speak of God in a world come of age, but rather how to proclaim God as Father in a world that is inhumane. What can it mean to tell a non-person that he or she is God's child?' (1983.57).

This theology took a liberational approach to the saving message of the gospel, by

rooting community life in a lived commitment to the poor, and seeking to enable and illuminate faith and doctrine by practical discipleship, thereby giving hope to the oppressed and marginalised in society, although this may not be seen as a necessity everywhere. It soon attracted criticism from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the Vatican, because of its sometime apparent ideological connection with perceived tainted Marxist models of social progress (rather than the more traditional call to charity constitutive of the Christian 'Kingdom of God'). This is summarised in a well-known poster quote from Dom Helder Camara: 'When I give food to the poor they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist'. Liberation theology has more recently been partially rehabilitated by Pope Francis following his ascent to the throne of Peter as Bishop of Rome, and, given that he is himself from South America, perhaps is not only sympathetic, but better understands this theology and its background, and the particular local circumstances its seeks to address and remedy.

In defending the theological integrity of liberation theology, Anthony Towey suggests its proponents and protagonists have highlighted the radical biblical prophetic tradition to be found in Amos, Jeremiah, and through to John the Baptist, as well as drawing upon Jesus' teachings which would indicate a 'preferential option for the poor', and a practical and generous 'Kingdom-building', a distinct ideological critique which has raised hermeneutical concern from the more traditional academic and religious authorities (2013.367). Arising from these South American Base Ecclesial Communities, where engagement and interpretation of the biblical text aims at a 'bottom-up' rebalancing of tradition and doctrine within a social organisation and community context involving worship and social action, Gutiérrez explains the concept thus:

> Without prophecy, the language of contemplation risks not involving itself in the history in which God acts and where we find him. Without the mystical dimension, the language of prophecy can narrow the vision and weaken the understanding of Him who makes all things new. (Rowlands 2007.36) (Towey 2013.368)

Towey notes that for Gutiérrez, there is ultimately no opposition between the prophetic reading of the text and mystical contemplation of God's wonder, in which the language of the prophet and the contemplative need one another, and are alive and active when the Church as the Body of Christ celebrates the Eucharist (2013.368).

Robert Beckford (1998) highlights the relationship between spirituality and liberation, where spirituality in this context is understood as the way in which God goes about the process of holistic liberation in this world, a redemptive work concerned with every aspect of human existence, and one in which the Church must be a place whose very spirituality ensures that it is God's community of resistance (1998.30, 31). This involves not just an overemphasis on the end-times and in waiting for Jesus to return (the eschaton), but in the meantime immersing ourselves in the social context, the better to be able to see what is, and what is not, of God, as agents of the Kingdom of God in the here and now (1998.32). I would argue that this has not been the historical situation in the Church's past, where it has often sought not to liberate but to control, and we may question why, in the modern period, the Church has taken a different stance in its approach to society. Indeed, some might still question whether the Church should be involved in any form of politicisation.

'Dread' in traditional English usage encompasses fear and anxiety, whereas here in Afro-Caribbean interpretation, its usage is inverted to denote and symbolise upliftment, freedom, and empowerment; indeed, even in forms of Caribbean dress, "dread locks" reflect this attitude. Beckford thinks: 'the Dread Christ is one who sides with all oppressed people in their struggle against all that denies them full humanity' (1998.73), symbolic of when language is used as a form of empowerment, intended to produce traditions of resistance and changes in both thought and action, themselves signifying and conveying a hidden meaning, which Beckford sees as unlocking truths about both God and human beings. When applied to Christology, Jesus is seen as the Christ for all oppressed peoples, thereby underpinning the dual task of resisting systems of oppression (such as White supremacy): 'as well as developing a political and social structure which is capable of challenging the causes of oppression (as in a domestic, neo-colonial situation)' (1998.145). Beckford notes how, on a political level, it is concerned with rebellion, signifying freedom from oppression, and suggesting something which is good and meaningful within the lives of Black people (1998.145). Here the Christ of faith both participates and is involved in the struggle for Black freedom, in which: 'the Jesus of history is with them as they protest, fight, boycott, celebrate and progress', where the dread Christ becomes a focus for: 'socio-political struggle and the source of joy for our resurrected lives' (1998.146, 147).

Beckford considers that the cross of Jesus demands a radical commitment to fighting injustice, and to confront that which causes oppression (1998.76, 77), asserting that:

> Liberation theology in Latin America has taught those struggling for justice to

> explore hermeneutical procedures which relocate the productive of theology within the locus of the experience of the oppressed. By giving experience a more weighty epistomological value, liberation theologians argue that we are more likely to find a hermeneutic which relates to the life-setting of oppressed people, something which may invert power-relations, and helping to assess: 'what and who Jesus is in the world today'. (1998.147)

Both liberation theology and black theology come to the fore in the following section. Here we will note how socio-political approaches to oppressed people and the possible use of liberation theology in their situation are not the only manner in which the problems of the marginalised voiceless people can be addressed, however. In the light of this I turn to the subject of the laughter of the oppressed, whose laughter in looking for justice and liberation is the subject of Jacqueline Bussie's important book, and ties in with much we have considered above.

The Laughter of the Oppressed – Jacqueline Bussie (2007)

In her work Jacqueline Bussie reviews three post-modern novels in which laughter can be detected, but what she describes as the 'laughter of the oppressed', a laughter which has little connection with either humour or comedy, but adds a further dimension to my own research as developed in this thesis, focused in the concluding chapters. Each novel is a work of reconstruction regarding events in the past. Elie Wiesel (Nobel Laureate and holocaust survivor) in *Gates of the Forest* (1966) draws upon his own experience by setting his novel within the context of the holocaust (which Plate asserts to be a key factor in triggering the era of post-modernity); Shusaku Endo in *Silence* (1969) focuses on Christian persecution, apostasy, and martyrdom in early seventeenth-century Japan; and Toni Morrison in *Beloved* (1987) focuses on African-American consciousness, laughter, and resistance to slavery in the USA prior to the American Civil War of the mid-nineteenth century. I focus upon drawing conclusions from each of the novels she reviews.

Bussie on Wiesel and 'Holocaust Laughter'

Whilst some question remains about whether there should be laughter in depictions and representations of the Holocaust, a research project undertaken in Israel by Chaya Ostrower (2000) interviewed fifty-five death camp survivors, and found that Jewish humour and laughter had indeed played a valuable role in the Holocaust, in that it had functioned as a defence mechanism, and was seen by some interviewees as an

essential element to their survival in the death camps such as Auschwitz (cited by Bussie 2007.30), with laughter here seen as a mode of survival, and a 'word against death'. Bessie concludes:

> 1) Laughter functions as a creative extra-linguistic response to tragic suffering.
>
> 2) On an ethical level, laughter functions as an interruption of the system and state of oppression, helping the sufferer resist internalisation of the oppressors' values, including dehumanisation of the oppressed.
>
> 3) Laughter provides a unique theodicean response to the problem of evil.
>
> 4) At a theological level, laughter helps the suffering believer to resist metaphysical despair, absolute doubt, and the logistical outcome of such despair – loss of faith, capturing the paradox of faith, in a way that rational discourse cannot.
>
> 5) Laughter is a form of "mad midrash" – an attempt to hold together God and the world in the face of radical evil. (2007.31, 32)

Laughter here can be seen as radical resistance, where, instead of tears or cries of anguish, Bussie envisages an incongruous laughter, an act of will, which can disrupt the traditional conception of laughter as mere physiological response.

Each novel Bussie reviews highlights the problem of the existence of radical evil in a world believed to have been created and sustained by a loving, omnipotent, and just divine Creator, and yet a faith and belief that is inevitably put to the test whenever evil becomes apparent and fractures the lives of the suffering faithful; however, even here, Bussie asserts that laughter: '*can* and *does* hold the affirmation of faith and its negation by tragedy together in one moment' (2007.49). Bussie thinks that whenever the laughter of the oppressed interrupts the banality of evil: 'Laughter attests to the reality that both radical negativity and faith remain, challenged and ruptured by each other', not in terms of moral exoneration, but instead through moral condemnation (2007.49, 51).

Bussie finds various possibilities for laughter as theological resistance within the Hasidic tradition of Judaism, embodied in the Jewish spiritual virtue of *chutzpah* (supreme confidence or daring, where laughter paradoxically is seen as both gift and

weapon, and as a means of vengeance), and of *hithazkut* (a strengthening of spirit, of morale, and thus of the will to live), seeing both these religious forms of resistance as life-affirming behaviours intended to be antidotes to despair and doubt (2007.53, 54).

Laughter in Shusaku Endo's *Silence*

Endo's work of historical fiction deals with the oppression, persecution, and martyrdom of many Christians in Japan in the early seventeenth century (1614 until around 1640). Bussie detects here a narrative of radical negativity – of the peasants' seemingly meaningless and gross suffering accompanied by God's silence. This occasions a collision with Rodrigues' Catholic narrative of faith, when confronted by a martyrdom smacking of absurdity and ugliness, rather than glory, paradoxically ostensibly negating each other. This results in a perceived incongruity between expectation and reality (the traditional understanding of the role of a missionary priest when compared with the actual reality of his life), in which: 'The inbreaking of evil creates an astonishing gap between expectation and reality, a gap so large as to resist thought' (2007.85, 86). This is a situation in which perhaps only laughter can express this dissonance between expectation and reality, a laughter which seemingly belies a complex theological truth that language itself cannot capture (2007.86). Whilst rationality and cognitive discourse eschew paradox, laughter attests to the paradox without attempting to resolve it, and Bussie suggests that those who laugh in the face of radical negation often do so in order to sustain the inexpressibility of the experience, since laughter expresses the inexpressible, in a way that language cannot in a narrative-negating event (2007.91).

Bussie asserts: 'Life is *simul* tragedy and hope, and humanity is *simul justus et peccator*' (Luther's assertion, simultaneously justified and sinner), a paradox which theodicy and rationality cannot express. In a situation where tragedy itself ruptures the language on which both rely, laughter functions to replace traditional theodicy and expresses a tragic theology (2007.103). Laughter can therefore be a creative theological and ethical response to the problem of evil, a response of protest and resistance, revealing its overwhelming presence as absurd and a paradox in light of the narrative of faith. The laughter of the oppressed disrupts the banality of evil, by disallowing evil's continued invisibility, leading Bussie to conclude: 'Laughter highlights the absurd, rather than allowing it to pass as normal or acceptable … [in which] the task of Christian theology [is] to shout to the world that evil is real, in order to summon our steadfast resistance' (2007.105).

Bussie believes that the banal laughter of oppressors is qualitatively different from the

laughter of the oppressed, a mocking, derisive, triumphant laughter, described by Hobbes (1651) as: ‘a sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of the other’ (quoted by Morreal, 1987.20). Bussie notes Arendt’s understanding of evil as sheer thoughtlessness, which may explain its invisibility in the lives of ordinary people who may purport no evil intentions, but rationally may inadvertently be caught up in it by “just doing their job”, which is why she thinks: ‘systematic evil is so frightening .. and so pervasive’ (2007.105, 106).

Endo, in *A Life of Jesus* (1987), interprets Christ on the cross as having laughed (a somewhat strange suggestion), and seeks to rediscover the “ineffective Christ”, one whose weakness upon the cross encapsulates the mystery of genuine Christian teaching. Endo suggests the radical profundity of Christ’s kenotic love for humanity is found displayed in his self-emptying, where Christ himself becomes one of the powerless people in the visible world (1978.145). Bussie similarly reflects upon Endo's choice of laughter as an appropriate trope to convey kenoticism, given that laughter, like tears, involves both a physical and psychological/spiritual release (2007.110), and believes such laughter can indeed help us to construct a theology of the cross (a term first coined by Martin Luther), by seeing Christ as the constant co-sufferer and self-emptying companion of humankind. Bussie suggests laughter accompanies a theology of the cross in such a way that it incorporates and encompasses this collision of narratives; the narrative of the resurrection with that of the crucifixion; the narrative of divine omnipotence with the narrative of divine kenosis; and the narrative of suffering with the narrative of redemption (2007.121), thereby asserting:

> Laughter functions as an apposite extra-linguistic resource for expression of a theology of the cross because a theology of the cross is inherently paradoxical, resistant to linguistic expressibility, and resultant from a collision of narratives. Martin Luther himself, the first theologian of the cross, saw faith and reason as incommensurable narratives whose collision evoked laughter. … The truth of faith is often ridiculous in its contradiction to historical experience. … However, in the face of this paradox, laughter functions as a creative means of sustaining the validity and integrity of both these contradictory narratives of faith and suffering. (2007.122)

Laughter in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

Toni Morrison’s novel is set during the slave era in America, and follows the story of

Sethe, a slave woman, who, in desperation, murders her own daughter in order to save her from a life of slavery. But the laughter Bussie detects is far from comedy and humour, but a type of laughter which is an ethical and theological response to the intense tragedy portrayed, leading Bussie to question what such laughter of the oppressed may mean when examining the radically negating experience of slavery. Here she suggests: ‘Laughter functions in the text as a creative, counter-hegemonic mode of ethical and theological resistance for the oppressed African-American community, … [denoting] an empowering and invaluable interruption of both the system and the state of oppression … an incongruous flower of resistance in the dark world of dehumanisation’ (2007.127).

Bussie notes that although Christianity had pervaded the slave community, the: ‘white Churches preached subservience to slave masters’, and were thus institutions tainted with racism, which fostered: ‘quietism and passivity among the people, who are still struggling for physical, legal, psychological, emotional, and socio-economic liberation from slavery’s oppression’ (2007.129). Robert Beckford (1998) notes how:

> The plantation owners, in collusion with willing churchmen, attempted to construct a version of Christianity for slave consumption, which would render slaves obedient and passive. This corrupt form of Christianity became known as the slavemaster's religion, and was diametrically opposed to some forms of Christianity developed by slaves. (1998.8).

Accordingly, in response the slaves developed an extensive religious life outside the institutional Church, a slave Christianity which Beckford describes as: 'a powerful force for rebellion' (1998.8)

Bussie examines the role of laughter as identity and community creation, in a situation where the most basic human dignity denied the slaves was the right to love, and to be with the person of their choosing; instead their reality and identity was defined and created by others, with a business-like objectification of slaves, and their treatment as non-persons (not acting subjects), where families could be split apart at auctions, and females forced to “breed”, either with other slaves, or the slave owners themselves (2007.145). Even after the emancipation of the slaves after the end of the American Civil War, persecution persisted, and basic human rights were ignored, as is found exemplified in Morrison's novel (see 1987.180). In situations such as these, Bussie suggests: ‘independent consciousness … can be an indispensable weapon of resistance, capable of exposing the dominant consciousness as oppressive ideology’, where laughter can be employed to engender solidarity with other oppressed people,

and thereby, in opposition to a more dominant culture (2007.146, 147).

Lawrence Levine (1977) notes how: ‘The oblique jokes of southern blacks were able to draw humour from the most painful situation … [Black laughter] … is from the time of slavery on … essential to black survival and the maintenance of group sanity and integrity’ (1977.314, 338). Bussie comments: ‘African American laughter separates the oppressed from the oppressor, by fostering group solidarity among those with the experiential knowledge necessary to “get” the joke’, whilst also noting Schopenhauer’s claim that laughter stems from paradox, from the perception of incongruity (quoted in Morreal (ed.), 1987.54, 55) (2007.169, 170). In summary, in Bussie’s work laughter becomes like another kind of language which enables and articulates the inexpressible, the latter being when two conflicting narratives collide and make normal ways of expressing the outcome almost impossible. This is important for my thesis because the concept of laughter as a viable 'word against death', which I argue here, also seems similarly paradoxical and counter-intuitive.

Bussie indicates that laughter is a strategy for dealing with oppression and suffering, and that laughter in situations of great evil (highlighted by both Wiesel and Endo), is not only cathartic but also a necessary (and perhaps *only*) means of protest, and strategy of resistance against evil. Laughter is an appropriate response to *paradox* (*simul justus et peccator*) of oppression and evil, and also relates to a *theologia crucis* (Luther, Moltmann). Lastly, laughter can handle paradox, whereas discursive thought cannot (because two contradictory premises must be held together).

Any theology of laughter which takes account of sociological critique and insights from liberation theology in giving hope to the poor and oppressed persons, and similar groups to those highlighted by Bussie, may, I suggest, provide a useful tool to delve deeper into the subversive nature of laughter, and its potential for undermining and ridiculing the authority and control exerted by repressive regimes, Communist or otherwise. Whilst mine is perhaps a subjective view, I have in mind how the election as Pope of John Paul II and his early papal visit to his native Poland enhanced the rise of the Solidarity movement, which was closely linked to the local Catholic Church, as the only independent institution powerful enough to stand up to the Polish Communist regime.

I would argue these strategies Bussie outlines can similarly be applied to laughter as a 'word against death', since death is seen by the living as oppressive, causing sorrow and suffering. Laughter in the face of death can be cathartic, and a means of protest

and resistance. The Christian faith embraces the paradox highlighted by Luther, but ultimately finds hope in a theology of the cross, and the paradoxical contradictions it represents, in providing grounds for laughter for the oppressed even amidst situations of utmost despair and tragedy, as has been outlined in this chapter. Here both sociology and liberation theology indicate that laughter can become a subversive strategy in facing that certainty of our own mortality, and which therefore *can* be a 'word against death' in the truest sense possible.

In this chapter, Davis and Zyderveld (in their respective works) have enabled us to see a sociological critique of societal power and structure that can include the role in which comedy and laughter may subvert the power of the powerful, which clearly connects to Bussie's analysis of the three novels considered here. Davis's and Zyderveld's work has prompted us to consider Gustavo Gutiérrez's and Jon Sobrino's theological critique of power in both Church and society within the context of liberation theology in Latin America. Although the main focus of liberation theology is socio-political, its ability to provide an inspirational means of resisting oppression from a Christian perspective ties in with my view of laughter as a strategy for the 'oppressed' when facing humankind's ultimate enemy, which is seen as death.

In the next chapter we move towards further defining and applying a theology of laughter, and consider the role and place of laughter and humour within that theology as a ‘word against death’.

CHAPTER SEVEN: TOWARDS DEFINING A THEOLOGY OF LAUGHTER, IN PARTICULAR ITS USE AS A 'WORD AGAINST DEATH'

In this chapter I seek to review and reflect upon previous significant material that has been examined in the preceding chapters. By citing further evidence, in section 7.1 I highlight and develop the positive affirming aspects of the theology of laughter suggested by Richard Cote (1986) (the first to suggest a theology of laughter) and Karl-Josef Kuschel (1994), whose work has featured in earlier chapters. This is because these two are the primary scholars who have pioneered and sought to develop a viable positive and life-affirming theology of laughter. But, this also involves examining other contributors' input, and in section 7.5, the significant work and theological insights of Jacqueline Bussie (2007), who suggests a theology of laughter derived from those *negative* expressions of laughter which involve neither humour nor comedy, but which occur in certain situations where language is ruptured and inadequate to the task, here described as 'the laughter of the oppressed'.

In section 7.2, I focus on the concept of the 'Laughing Jesus' found within certain 'Gnostic' sources concerning ideas of continuity after death within the 'life dream', as detailed in the work of Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy. In section 7.3, I consider the work of Mickhail Bakhtin and other scholars regarding the role of the grotesque in both laughter and death. In section 7.4, I draw together the use and application of laughter and humour as 'words against death', to assert that they meet the criteria laid down in Douglas Davies's definition in *Death, Ritual and Belief* (1997). My own conclusions regarding a theology of laughter are held over to be drawn together in the concluding chapter eight, to follow.

7.1 A review and comment on the thoughts concerning a theology of laughter as first outlined by Cote (1986) and Kuschel (1994)

Richard Cote in *Holy Mirth: A Theology of Laughter* (1986) was the first to suggest the development of a theology of laughter, and conjectures what parameters such a theology might consist of, encompass and contain, suggesting some types of laughter would be inappropriate, such as the superior, mocking and derisive laughter (as found

in much of the Old Testament), on the basis that it can prove so destructive towards individuals or a particular stereotyped group, in an ‘us’ and ‘them’ situation or scenario. Cote says in looking for some sort of ‘family background’ or ancestry to justify a theology of laughter, negative theology, the theology of play and process theology, all bring important correctives to our traditional understanding of God, opening up the possibility of imagining a God who can and does laugh, thereby enabling a theology of laughter to be constructed (1986.31). Cote’s initial ground-breaking work reviews these particular theological developments, as explained herewith.

For Cote, negative theology laughs at the inappropriateness of God-talk, deflating the self-confidence of those who would propound that it is possible to attain a rational understanding of the revealed 'word' through natural intellectual power. It reminds us God remains necessarily mysterious and ineffable to mere human reasoning. Negative theology exposes theology as little more than a tongue-in-cheek exercise, pointing out the poverty and inappropriateness of speaking about God in terms of human language, laughing at our human attempts to speak about God, who (in Isaiah 40.18) challenges us: ‘To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?’ Cote considers by eliminating God-talk altogether, we reveal: 'an infinite darkness through which silence and love alone can discern God, … [that] teaches us that God is experienced more truthfully in the dark night and emptiness of the soul than in the most brilliant theological discourse' (1986.33). Here the laughter of faith plays a more important role than the logic of reason, with Cote noting: 'Negative theology, like the theology of laughter, thrives on paradox and surely the greatest paradox is faith itself. Such is the humour of faith, which grounds and justifies a theology of laughter' (1986.35).

Cote considers a theology of play is a necessary corrective to a puritanical and overly solemn image of God, with play here being fundamentally linked to freedom, and to free choice, the very opposite of compulsion, enabling people to temporarily escape from the immediate cares and material necessities of life (albeit briefly), suggesting: 'this playful freedom also characterizes God and the wonder of God's creation'; and that play is essentially an encounter with possibility, in which we must always expect the unexpected and be open to infinite possibility (1986.34). He similarly suggests: 'The same can be said of our encounters with God, whose infinite love is forever taking us by surprise and, if we are open to it, offering the possibility of new life' (1986.35).

For Cote, in process thought, primordial reciprocity exists between being and creative becoming, which are two essentially interdependent features of the same reality. Here

God, as the supreme instance of being, must also be the supreme instance of creative becoming; one who does not stand aloof in some kind of Olympian immutability, but who in his innermost being is involved, affected, and moved both by his creatures and creation (1986.36, 37). He suggests this is the picture painted by the biblical narrative, of a God genuinely related to us, one who is concerned and affected by what we do and what becomes of us, and one whose laughter, like ours, is contagious, which Cote sees as an authenticating sign of God's intense, dynamic and loving relationship with us, and that out of this view must inevitably arise a notion of a living deity (see 1986.42, 43).

My own view here is that process theology seeks to reflect upon God's relation to the world, and thereby to challenge the prevailing traditional and sacrosanct idea that God is immutable (unchanging and utterly incapable of change), wherein process theology seeks to correct such an overly static image of the Divine, calling into question the view that if God were unchanging, unaffected, and unmoved by everything we do or suffer here on earth, then all our endeavours would effectively have no value, all our prayers would be quite futile, and our worship would at best be a sham. In summarizing these three theological developments, Cote says:

> Negative theology emphasizes the inappropriateness of pure rationality when speaking about God; the theology of play celebrates freedom and the surprise of unheard-of possibilities; and process theology allows God to react to, and really be affected by what we humans do. Taken together, these correctives enhance the prospects of a theology of laughter. (1986.37)

I believe this balance which Cote outlines (in his brief and somewhat repetitive survey) is, nonetheless, instructive. In Cote's view, no one has yet devised an adequate theory of laughter itself; and that: 'despite the fact that human laughter has been observed, studied, and researched from every angle, it remains something of a mystery and subject to numerous interpretations' (1986.19). Whilst clearly there have been many serious theories expounded by psychologists over the years, including Sigmund Freud, laughter still remains a mystery, but within the context of Christian faith, Cote suggests it is best understood as: 'a sympathetic vibration of God's heavenly laughter – a laughter that tells us that, in spite of everything, all is well' (1986.19). Quoting sociologist Peter Berger in *A Rumour of Angels* (1970), who sees: 'in humour "a rumour of angels" and a "hint of the transcendent" - in short, a divine signal of what it means to be human' (1970.69-72), Cote suggests:

> Laughter is a blunt, brilliant, brave affirmation on the part of humankind that death is not the final answer. We seek a vision of the place where this joy and this laughter are everlasting. Only when viewed from this perspective, as a sacred mystery, does human laughter disclose its true meaning and beauty. (1986.20)

That very ‘brave affirmation’ that death is not the final answer, I believe lends support to my thesis that laughter can prove a ‘word against death’. If, indeed, we do share in the goodness and perfection of God so as to share in God's mirth and comic spirit, as Cote suggests (see 1986.21), then if we were indeed to apply God's mirth and comic spirit to our thinking, I believe this would correct our often blinkered perception of the Christian life.

Cote cites Meister Eckhart as one who believed that God laughs out of an abundance of divine life, energy and love; one who tells us we should never put our trust in a spirituality that is devoid of laughter, because good humour and laughter characterise the innermost relationship between the persons of the Trinity, of which Eckhart says: ‘When the Father laughs to the Son, and the Son laughs back to the Father, that laughter gives pleasure, that pleasure gives joy, that joy gives love, and love gives the persons of which the Holy Spirit is one’ (Raymond B. Blakney [1941.245]) (1986.54). Cote thinks this human way of depicting God is not just a metaphor or a poetic figure of speech, but points to a deeper and more fundamental religious truth about God's love, namely, his acute “sense of possibility” (i.e., process theology), suggesting: ‘God laughs at the unlimited possibilities that divine love is forever opening up for us, possibilities so real for us that we call them the Kingdom of God’ (1986.54).

Cote finds a humorous aspect of God's infinite patience and love is demonstrated in the way that God tolerates our bungling performance and repeated failures with much greater patience than we do, revealing his good humour, suggesting: ‘When we become a fearful burden to ourselves, God's patience gives him the last laugh ... always ready to forgive us ... be patient with us; ... always ready to explore new possibilities, however unteachable we may be’ (1986.55). This symbol of a laughing God Cote’s work suggests could dispel unnecessary fears and free us from the inhuman pressure of constantly having to prove ourselves, directing our attention to the fact that life is more hope-filled than we might ordinarily conceive it to be. Cote suggests even the most wretched human condition has within it the promise of redemption and ultimate liberation (1986.56). I claim such laughter of liberation and redemption, in being able to dispel our fears, is a ‘word against death’.

Cote's work helpfully lists many elements he believes constitute humour and may provoke laughter, such as surprise, unpredictability, contrast, incongruity, possibility, which, whilst individually may not have much religious meaning in themselves, can nonetheless coalesce in such a way as to make sense of such humour and laughter within the context of Christian faith. Cote states: 'In this religious experience a thrilling new something emerges, the sudden awareness of God's liberating sense of humour', suggesting further that this may develop to become: 'a full-fledged spirituality', one in which: 'a theology becomes not only possible but feasible' (1986.59). Cote's analysis suggests: 'Theology must always be grounded in the common experience of the Christian community; so our theology of laughter is grounded in the Christian consensus that God has a sense of humour' (1986.59), which seems to me to be an eminently sensible assertion, although such experience may be found in many faiths.

Cote is concerned whether the comic vision (which I take to be a way of looking at the absurdities, inconsistencies, and paradoxes of life) and Christian faith can be reconciled, and whether a sense of humour can form the basis of a genuine Christian spirituality (1986.16). I believe it can, and may enable people to discern that same perception we find outlined by the biblical writers in the scriptures, where both the presence of God and the invisible hand of God were considered to be at work within the ordinary events of daily life, where God's influence and providential care may indeed be detected in those chance events for which there appears to be no apparent cause or rational explanation. Cote asserts the humour of faith encourages such divine recognition, and makes us laugh (1986.63), noting: 'Humour can also be future orientated through the perception of possibility, grounded in the conviction that anything is possible with God (Luke 1.37)' (1986.64).

When Cote describes orthodox Christians here as future-orientated, he expresses the belief that the hope and fulfilment of the kingdom of heaven lies before and beyond us in this life, and our prayers are therefore for what many would regard as lost causes, and might well seem to them as laughable. This eschatological aspect of God's humour does indeed give hope, and I believe provides those very 'words against death' even as some would pray for the dead. To many others, Christians may seem like 'holy fools', and perhaps this attitude explains why authentic Christianity must always seem like madness to the unbelieving or disinterested secular world, in a way outlined earlier in chapter five. Cote suggests here: 'Whatever the final outcome of our impossible prayers, we want to be able to laugh "with him and in him", [and so] … come to experience and believe in God's sense of humour and mirth' (1986.65).

Cote explains: 'Our theology of laughter is only an attempt to monitor, explain, and express this faith experience, … the invisible hand of God, the sanctification of trivia, and the perception of possibility', which, for Cote, when: 'taken together ... constitute what might be called the foundations of Christian laughter' (1986.65). As far as Cote is concerned, what prompts a Christian to laugh is the liberating perception that God is already laughing (1986.65, 66). Whilst he questions what qualities distinguish Christian laughter from ordinary profane laughter, he also notes how: ‘Christian laughter … will often appear inappropriate or excessive in the eyes of the world; … [and that] laughter shares in the very ambiguity of human existence' (1986.66, 68). In this I agree and support much of Cote’s analysis. However, while there are, of course, no easy answers about what makes Christian laughter distinct, I think he indicates some of its reasonable constraints in ordinary daily life under stable non-threatening circumstances, whereas Bussie’s work challenges us to expand our vision to encompass ‘the laughter of the oppressed’.

Karl-Josef Kuschel considers the provocative joy which the kingdom of God theology indicates is necessary to extend frontiers and breaks taboos, in particular the way in which Jesus uses grotesque imagery (as in Mark 10.25), citing Jesus' use of bold parables, of disarming answers, radical paradoxes, and indeed his perplexing beatitudes (1994.77), commenting: ‘Here is neither laughter at God nor laughter at the wicked nor laughter at unsuspecting and blinded people. All that is alien to Jesus. Jesus' laughter is the expression of a freedom for God which bursts bonds and breaks taboos’ (1994.78, 79).

Kuschel considers that for the Christian, whose laughter he sees as stemming from a spirit of joy and happiness, there are limits to laughter, and to what may be considered laughable; ethical considerations where what may appear to be liberating may become repressive, particularly where laughter is spiteful and humourless, or is at the expense of those who are weak, or being exploited, or involving the socially despised (1994.125). Kuschel thinks in such instances:

> There needs to be a deliberate refusal to laugh, of not going along with the crowd, even raising an objection to laughter at the expense of being ridiculed or reviled. … Where laughter has lost any connection with humanity and ethics, it is no longer an expression of a culture of laughter, but of an uncultured society in which feelings have grown cold. This is the humour of *Schadenfreude*, of malice. Criticism of laughter: the ancients practiced it, and when practiced against the contrary laughter of the philistine to whom nothing is holy, it is still

> justified today. (1994.125)

For the Christian, there are dangers and pitfalls to overcome in distinguishing between what qualifies as Christian laughter, and that uncaring harsh and indifferent laughter which is more common in the wider secular world of post-modernity, which often has negative, destructive or belittling aspects. But I think this cannot limit and exclude that arising from a theology of the cross, or the justification which lies behind the laughter of the oppressed.

Christian laughter must, of course, where possible seek to mirror the pattern of Christ's life, and include incorporating an uncommon degree of detachment, a spiritual distancing transcending the narrow limits of our immediate environment, culture and circumstance, in order to be able to see the larger picture from the standpoint of the gospel. Should anybody somehow be enslaved or oppressed, it is still possible for the mind and spirit to rise above such circumstances and remain free in God's presence. A Christian theology of laughter therefore needs both faith and belief to be brought to bear in our laughter-making, and for this to happen quite spontaneously and unconsciously, our consciences ideally need first to be both informed and familiar with the teachings and message of Jesus Christ, and the other New Testament letter writers like St Paul, to: ‘see through the eyes of God who sees through everything’ as Cote puts it (1986.67), where I believe laughter may prove to be just such a suitable tool and guide. Cote notes:

> Laughter is not Christian simply because the person who laughs happens to be a Christian. Nor does it follow that Christians have an exclusive monopoly on holy laughter. It can be either the concrete embodiment of worldly cynicism or it can be a sign of God's presence; it can be holy or sinful, liberating or oppressive, creative or destructive – in short, a process of liberation or imprisonment. (1986.68, 69)

My view is that spiritual laughter can transcend the limitations and boundaries of a particular faith, whilst bearing in mind that laughter can be potentially a mixed blessing, with deeper and darker overtones found within its negative aspects. With regard to what constitutes Christian laughter, Kuschel asserts that from a Christian perspective:

> The God of Jesus is not a God who laughs at human beings, or mocks the wicked, or writes off sinners. Instead of an ambiguous laughter of God found in the Old Testament, the New Testament knows only of God's joy, a joy which

> must surely necessarily express itself in laughter, but one to which laughter is not alien, with joy and laughter seen here as inseparably linked together. It is therefore no chance that the basic formula for Jesus' cause is evangelion, good news, and not dysangelion, threatening news. (1994.75)

This statement I believe provides an important consideration when constructing a positive Christian theology of laughter, because this is one clearly based on joy in God, found in the positive *joie de vivre* of Christian laughter, which must surely be the right approach in most circumstances. Such laughter is life-affirming, and not in any way intended to be hurtful or destructive. But what place for Bussie's 'laughter of the oppressed? Whilst I believe that (in an ideal world) Christian laughter should not seek to be derisive, superior, or mocking (the primary Old Testament model), I believe that a Christian theology of laughter needs to be one which is courageous, honest, and impartial, and be, if necessary (as Harrison reminds us), a laughter prepared to speak the truth in love, even directed to confront abusive power and authority. Accordingly, I suggest the mocking and derisive laughter found in the Old Testament, and touched upon in Bussie's work, may, within necessary proportional constraints, still continue to play a useful role within society. Following the example and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, I suggest Christian laughter needs to be moderated and restrained in application, so as not to appear to be threatening, but more like the occasional gentle mocking laughter of Jesus hinted at in the Gospels (as Trueblood's work highlights), but noting we do not live in an ideal world, or necessarily in a just society.

Barry Sanders (1995) (citing Mary Grant [1924]), notes that moderation is required in the case of mocking and derisive laughter, as exemplified in the character and teachings of Democritus of Abdena (known as the 'Laughing Philosopher'), whose *Testimonia* advises against laughing derisively at the misfortunes of others, and urges pity instead (Grant 1924.15) (1995.80). Accordingly, Sanders suggests: 'derisive laughter needs to be administered wisely and judiciously; it must be delivered with its heavenly source in mind, and that means remaining "somewhat aloof". The one who ridicules must regulate his or her own power by intending only goodwill and gentle criticism' (1995.80, 81).

Sanders points out how Plato had introduced a concept which translates as: 'speaking truth under cover of a jest', which, whilst seemingly appearing to offer no challenge, is also not perceived as a potential threat (1995.92, 93), noting: 'The ironic humour of Socrates coupled with theories of the liberal jest of Aristotle and Plutarch gave rhetoric its distinctively comic bite' (1995.116). To this debate, Murray Davis comments:

'Uplifting humour, which depicts the upward mobility of inferior beings, is “kind” and “gentle”', an appreciative humour which enobles'; however: 'Conversely, degrading humour, which dramatises the downward mobility of superior beings, is “contemptuous” and “caustic”. Such *depreciative humour* literally “puts down” gods or man by debasing their essential attributes' (1993.115). To my mind these considerations are in accord with what I see as the role which a positive and nuanced Christian theology of laughter may play and fulfil. But sadly we continue to live in an oppressive and unjust world, in which such constraints may sometimes prove either inappropriate or ineffective.

Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (1953) points to another particular aspect of Christ’s teaching, advising: ‘The very highest Universal Truth is something so simple that a child may understand it. This surely was in Jesus’ mind when he said, “I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hidden these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes”' (Matthew 11.25) (1953.53). Soren Kierkegaard (1941) teaches that humour is a reflection of the childlike, but is not thereby inconsistent with true maturity: ‘For the sadness in legitimate humour consists in the fact that honestly and without deceit it reflects in a purely human way upon what it is to be a child’ (1941.533). Elton Trueblood similarly points to the connection between the humorous and the childlike, and that Christian laughter must have something of a childlike innocence in its application (1964.38, 39). He believes the evident purpose of Christ’s humour in the Gospel accounts is to clarify and increase understanding, rather than to hurt, and that its clear aim is something other than harm. Whilst Christ's humour is sometimes seen to move over into sarcasm, that sarcastic thrust is not the major factor here, but belongs to what George Meredith (1956) describes as: 'the laughter of comedy'. But unlike satire which: 'is a blow in the back or the face', he thinks that it: 'is impersonal and of unrivalled politeness, nearer a smile - often no more than a smile' (1956.47). Perhaps a Christian theology of laughter requires such child-like trust and application within the Christian life, and similar innocence in the type of laughter employed.

Trueblood considers that satire seems utterly absent in the humour preserved in the Gospels, and whilst Christ’s various attacks on the Pharisees may be strong, their object is the Pharisaic spirit, and that they are not directed against a particular individual (1964.51). Whilst we may seek humour for humour’s sake, Trueblood notes there seems to be little or none of this found in the words attributed to Christ, whose sole purpose seems always to be the revelation of some facet of truth that might not otherwise be revealed, noting: ‘The humour of Christ is employed, it would appear, only because it is a means of calling attention to what would, without it, remain hidden or

unappreciated. Truth, and truth alone, is the end' (1964.52). These factors must accordingly be borne in mind and inform our understanding of Christian laughter when it comes to developing a Christian theology of laughter. Here Cote highlights for Christians: 'The whole thrust of Jesus' proclamation, which Christian laughter keeps alive in the world, is a challenge to conceive the inconceivable, to say what cannot be said, to applaud what should not be applauded, and to do what cannot be done' (1986.71).

I believe such a view is very far removed from Paul Lakeland's apologetic position towards mission within post-modernity, but agree with Cote that for those who seek to reflect Christ's teachings, a more proactive stance and involvement is sometimes necessary, including a proper concern for the oppressed of this world. Michael Screech's (1986) work demonstrates that at the foot of the Cross, laughter was both present and possible. I believe this has positive implications when considering the laughter of the oppressed, and the longing of many in this fallen world for liberation from oppression and fear. Indeed, here I note how Cote suggests that the laughter of faith only makes sense if the darker side of life is also met and acknowledged with such full recognition (1986.16).

Cote notes how laughter thrives on incongruity, and that such creative tension and incongruity are to be found within the formula for action which Jesus gives to his disciples, and where, in Matthew 10.16, they are sent out into a potentially hostile world as 'sheep in the midst of wolves', and yet are to be 'wise as serpents and innocent as doves' (1986.18). This is a Christian mode of being seen by Cote as: 'to be in the world yet not of the world, to be wise as serpents yet meek as doves, ...to lose our life in order to save it, to pardon unpardonable sins and love unlovable people' (1986.71), whilst also being: 'a life that is rooted in the eternity of God as well as in the dust and muddiness of the world, a life of pitiable misery and breathtaking greatness, a life charged with the resounding victory of Christ as well as with the sorry relapses of human frailty' (1986.18). I think that this balance of opposites is precisely the paradox which Jesus expects from all who follow him, who, whilst coming to the light of Christ, must nonetheless often encounter and embrace the dark side of human nature.

In her work, Bussie has highlighted an important aspect which both Cote and Kuschel may have overlooked, suggesting that our theology of laughter must incorporate the use of laughter as a strategy to be used against oppression and oppressors, particularly in such situations (like the holocaust) where language is corrupted and inadequate and verbal communication breaks down, and where no other feasible form

of resistance is available. Thus I suggest that Bussie's 'voice of the voiceless' becomes effectively the *laughter of the voiceless*, a laughter which may fight back in the only way possible to challenge and defy both oppression and its perpetrators.

Here Robert Beckford (1998) believes to be a Christian is to be called to struggle against oppression, and that there is a need to recognise the relationship between Christian faith and the struggle for justice in the world against oppressive structures and systems, and for working towards liberation, in which issues of social justice as well as social welfare both come into play (1998.12, 13). But is not this a politicisation of Christianity? Christ said his kingdom was 'not of this world'. This requires the application of a holistic approach to life, one which is not just about struggle and resistance against the forces of oppression, but also one which is conversely also about fulfilment and celebration, which he describes as 'pressing on' or to 'press along', seen as embodying the means to overcome physical or spiritual 'trials and tribulations'. Of course, this will depend on to what extent the Christian engagement with the world is seen as a Christian vocation. Christian awareness is not only a struggle against oppression. Beckford says:

> To press along is to be Christ's servants in the world. Moreover, to press along is to live in the spirit, because victory is only assured for those who make the Spirit of God their driving force and inspiration. To press along also reveals assurance of concrete victory in the future. However, the assurance of future hope does not negate participation in the struggle here and now. (1998.20)

But is not the fight an inner struggle?

I believe our Christian theology of laughter both needs to be able to encompass and include the phenomenon of such 'holy fools', who, through transcendence and laughter, may also witness to the meaningfulness of human life and existence. Paul McDonald sees the status of 'holy fools' as legitimate messengers, who may both acknowledge and sustain post-modern chaos, by both indicating ingenious assertions, and by themselves becoming such symbols of transcendent significance, the former creating the latter possibility (2010.130). By reflecting upon the contradiction implicit in the term 'holy fool', McDonald thinks that whilst 'fool' suggests comedy, chaos, and relativity, by contrast 'holy' indicates something of transcendent value (2010.130). McDonald thinks such: 'humorists produce narratives in which relativity can be both acknowledged and transcended: humour creates chaos and undermines all positions, but then it can also offer *itself* as compensation. Humour and laughter become

expressions of our common humanity' (2010.130).

Modern-day 'holy fools' may have an important role to play in both challenging society and social ills, and this may well extend to encompass and challenge various aspects of our theology, and indeed the Christian Church itself, in much the same role as those early Christian 'holy fools' fulfilled within monasticism, the Church, and the society of their day. This tradition of 'holy fools' I believe has persisted through many centuries, and can be detected in various aspects of eccentric behaviour, as, for example, is recorded in the life of Francis of Assisi, a phenomenon which continues to remain pertinent. This role and function continues to be present in post-modernity, both within and outside the Church, as, for example, in the ministry of the Anglican priest and clown Roly Bain, in the television comedy work of the late Dave Allen, and variously in the sketch and feature film work of the *Monty Python* team (as in *Holy Grail, Life of Brian,* and *The Meaning of Life)*. Their work not only lampoons but highlights and presents a critique of Christian belief and doctrine, and may qualify them, in a very broad sense, to be regarded as theologians (in a similar way Robert Beckford (1986) extends this definition to the music and lyrics of the late Bob Marley [1986.115-129]). I suggest the concept and role of the 'holy fool' needs to come within the compass and remit of a Christian theology of laughter, both within the Church, and also, for those viewing it from a wider perspective, in order that we may better 'see ourselves as others see us'.

By affirming and applying a theology of laughter in their lives, Christians may receive from God the courage to laugh, and to face all things, including potential persecution and death. Such laughter may embrace that darker side of life and the worst aspects of ‘man’s inhumanity to man’, and may prove to be ‘words against death’, bearing in mind Jesus’ words of both warning and hope presented in John 16.33: ‘In the world you will find suffering, but have courage: I have conquered the world’. Undergirding all Christian laughter there needs to be a bold and positive affirmation of life, a firm conviction that the God of biblical revelation is both a living and life-loving God; and none more so than is reflected in the testimony in John's Gospel, that Christ came that people might have life and have it in abundance. Cote is right to caution that tragedies will touch Christians just as cruelly as any who do not believe, or cannot hope, or refuse to love, but affirms:

> We can still laugh and find joy in life … because in the midst of death we know and believe that God keeps every promise. If the God we believe brought life where death had seemed invincible in the experience of

> Christ, then we are free to look for life in the most threatening moments of our lives and our world. Nothing of significance can ever be said of Christian laughter that does not stem from Christ's victory over death. (1986.72)

This supports my argument that laughter and humour are effective 'words against death', for faith and belief in God's promises in raising Jesus from the dead on the third day, enables Christians to look for life and hope in the most threatening moments of their lives and in this world, and gives courage to even laugh at death itself, ultimately steming from Christ's victory over death. For, in spite of the apparent invincibility of death, Christian laughter enables people still to laugh and to find joy in life, whatever the circumstances. Cote asserts:

> Such is the humour of hope. It enables us to laugh at the prospect of life when others see only cause for despair. It is a laughter that rolls back the stones of empty tombs and reveals the resurrection. It is a laughter that loves the world with the eyes of those who are not yet born. (1986.73)

Humour and laughter do not treat death as meaningless, or with contempt or callousness, but always with respect. Whilst laughter may be seen by some as insensitive at those times when grief is almost too great to bear, it may nonetheless come into play in the aftermath of death, when some retrospection and readjustment needs to take place, for as Kate Fox comments concerning traditional English reserve, laughter may be regarded as undignified or inappropriate before the funeral, whereas post-ceremony, some gentle humour may be finally permitted (2004. 375-7, noted above on p.19). A Christian theology of laughter, when applied and extended as a ‘word against death’, offers us such a glimpse of the alternative reality found in and through Christian faith and belief, so allowing us to survive and to carry on living, keeping alive the promise that surviving real life is possible, whatever knocks life (and death) confront us with, those all too familiar ‘slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’. I claim that humour and laughter do provide us with such necessary ‘words against death’, a concept Robert Corrigen (1981) expounds:

> The central intuition of comedy is an innate and deeply felt trust in life. In spite of the many failures we may and do experience – our tragic fate – the comic spirit expresses elation over our condition because it is so supremely conscious of the way life pushes on, of the many ways it continually asserts itself. The spirit of comedy is the spirit of resurrection, and the joy that attends our

> experience of the comic is the joy that comes from the realization that despite all our individual defeats, life does nonetheless continue on its merry way. (1981.8)

I conjecture laughter and humour (and the comedy that may occasion them) fulfil all the necessary criteria Douglas Davies defines as 'words against death'; they can mitigate death's sting in such a way that for those with Christian hope, death is not allowed to have the last or final word. We must clearly acknowledge that, as a balanced view, many taking an agnostic position would not accept my premise, and might regard this assertion as 'pie-in-the-sky', for Freud would doubtless envisage this as a crutch which enables people to evade reality, and Marx would regard it as a phantasm which enables the desire for peace and justice to be projected into the concept of an after-life. Nonetheless, Christian faith and belief suggest otherwise.

In my necessarily descriptive outlining of Cote's theology of laughter, as well as that of Kuschel, I recognise that, although extremely valuable, their work needed expanding upon, which at the time of writing, they had either not considered or commented upon, e.g. the application of laughter and humour against death, and its use as a foil in a way that I suggest would be encompassed in what Davies (1997) defines as a 'word against death'. But I further suggest that we also need to take into account and incorporate within a Christian theology of laughter the role and function of those negative aspects of laughter which Bussie identifies as the 'laughter of the oppressed', so that thereby our Christian theology of laughter has wider parameters than Cote and Kuschel envisaged. This provides a more balanced analysis.

We turn now to consider the 'Laughing Jesus' found within the writings and beliefs of those diverse early Christian era groups who would later be encompassed within the collective term of 'Gnostics', and their ideas of continuity after death in what was seen as the 'life dream'.

7.2 The role of the 'Laughing Jesus' of Gnosticism, and ideas of continuity after death within the 'life dream'

Cote contends there is a difference between being and creative becoming, which to my mind links into the Gnostic concept of *gnosis*, of 'awakening'. Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy, although not dealing with a theology of Gnoticism as such, suggest when we are identified with our separate life-persona we are effectively 'dead' to our essential nature, and life can become a nightmare of fear and suffering, citing Plotonius that we

have ‘fallen asleep in Hell’, and also how *The Secret Book of John* urges us to: ‘wake from heavy sleep and take off the garments of Hell’ (2005.158). Whilst we are identified with a separate self, they suggest the life-dream inevitably becomes a nightmare, but once we ‘awaken to oneness’, hell is transformed into heaven, and we are given the experience of what they describe as ‘big love’, a state of loving life which arises when we wake up, a concept they suggest points to the collective nature and understanding of Gnosticism, whereby the individual becomes caught up and subsumed into the collective nature of such ‘awakening’ (2005.158). Drawing upon the teaching of *The Gospel of Truth*, they suggest life is: ‘a joy to those who have rediscovered who they really are by waking up’, for they hold that when we wake up and live lucidly, we find that we are already in heaven (2005.158). The authors link this with a passage in *The Gospel of Thomas* where Jesus is asked: ‘When will Heaven come?’, and replies: ‘It won’t come by waiting for it, because Heaven is spread out upon the earth but people don’t see it’ (2005.159).

Freke and Gandy present a view of what they perceive to be Gnostic Christianity, which is that whilst we identify with the separate self, we are dead and need to come to life or resurrect, highlighting that the Greek word used could translate as either ‘resurrect’ or ‘awaken’. For them, the resurrection is not something which happened in the past to Jesus, but represents waking up and experiencing *gnosis*. Resurrection is therefore not something which may happen to you after death, but something you must experience for yourself in this present moment by becoming conscious of your essential nature as being one of awareness. They quote from *The Treatise on the Resurrection*, which announces: ‘The world is an illusion. The resurrection/awakening is the revelation of reality’. This particular treatise teaches that when Jesus was resurrected from the dead he: ‘swallowed the visible by means of the invisible and showed us the way to our immortality’ (2005.159). As far as it concerns Christianity, this Gnostic teaching is about being ‘saved’ by resurrecting to ‘eternal life’, with the Greek word usually translated as ‘saved’, which can also mean to be ‘preserved’, or to become ‘permanent’, which these authors say involves becoming: ‘conscious of being the emptiness of invisible awareness which contains the world, and which exists unborn and undying beyond time’ (2005.159). Such resurrecting is seen as awakening to *gnosis*, with Tertullian noting that the Gnostics taught that: ‘Those without gnosis are dead’ (2005.159).

For the authors, the Gnostic secret of being able to face death is simply to die now (as envisaged in the sacrament of Christian baptism?), to be what Plato describes as one who: ‘makes dying his way of life’, who follows St Paul when he says: ‘I die daily’, and

follows the teaching of Valentinus that: ‘We choose to die so that we can annihilate death completely’ (2005.163). Here they quote the Islamic Gnostic Abd al-Kader, who explains:

> There are two types of death. One which is inevitable and common to all, and one which is voluntary and experienced by the few. It is the second death which Muhammad prescribed saying ‘Die before you die’. Those who die this voluntary death are resurrected. (2005.163)

For Freke and Gandy, to identify exclusively with the body is to be in a constant state of anxiety (either consciously or unconsciously), but to awaken in the Gnostic sense is to realise that the death of the body is to be no more feared than the dying of a dream when we awaken from sleep, and the more lucid we become, the less death is to be feared; indeed, it is to realise that death is safe, understanding that renewal only comes through dissolution. They quote this teaching of the Gnostic Pagan Epictetus:

> It is your fear of death that terrifies you. You can think about a thing in many ways. Scrutinize your idea of death. Is it true? Is it helpful? Don’t fear death. Rather, fear your fear of death. (2005.163)

But in orthodox mainstream Christianity, Jesus, in his death, invites us to taste of death, because in him God has willed this path. I conjecture the Gnostic position is simply an escapism. The terrifying aspect of death, and our fear of it, is linked to our identity with our mortal nature, and to how attached we are to our present persona within what they perceive as the ‘life-dream’. Freke and Gandy consider the moment of death will be either hellish or heavenly, depending upon how ‘awake’ we are at the time, and if in the present moment we can experience lucid living, then it should also be possible to experience lucid dying, and to embrace the end of this dream with some sense of appreciation, of excitement, and with ‘big love’ (2005.164). Yet, by way of contrast, in orthodox Christian belief, Jesus experiences death as an agonising reality, for both in the Garden of Gethsemane, and on the Cross at Calvary, the Gospels affirm he engages fully with it. Here, both the recognition of it and the impact made by his own suffering and death, suggest nothing to deny its reality and horror.

According to Freke and Gandy, the Gnostic ‘Laughing Jesus’ represents a state of awakening, in which we realise that life is good and death is safe (which the authors call *pronoia*), described as the reasonable faith that life is on your side; a fundamental trust in the goodness of existence when we ‘awaken to oneness’. And I begin to

wonder whether Gnosticism failed because the sheer tangibility of the physical world could not place death at some superficial margins, or was it because the mystery drama schools could no longer appear sustainable. For here I believe these authors concentrate on an aspect of death in relation to Jesus which says little about those mystery drama schools of the early centuries.

For them, being ‘pronoid’ is to embrace the inherent polarity of existence, with the life-dream arising from that polarity, acknowledging that life is sometimes bad, whilst remembering it is also *always* good. They believe that *what* is experienced is *relatively* good or bad, but *that* we experience anything at all is *absolutely* good. Every experience in the life-dream is therefore part of the process of awakening to oneness, and ultimately all our bad experiences, even suffering, are good (2005.165, 166). Yet it seems to me that suffering has always been used as a mechanism in cases of control and subjugation. I think the recognition that others can be made to suffer militates against this Gnostic view. For Freke and Gandy, all that is necessary (what they describe as the laughter of Jesus) is the *gnosis* that life is good and death is safe. But in conclusion I would note that these authors are not dealing with the very complex nature of Gnosticism, much of which still remains a mystery, rather they may be supplying the needs of a 'New Age' spirituality from that perspective. Therefore I believe that on their interpretation, for such 'Gnostics', this laughter must surely be regarded as qualifying as a ‘word against death’! We now move to examining the role of the grotesque in laughter and in death.

7.3 The role of the grotesque in laughter and in death

For Bakhtin, the world of the Romantic grotesque is a terrifying world, alien to man. This contrasts with the earlier medieval and Renaissance folk culture perception (explored in chapter five p.166), which was familiar with the element of terror, but was represented by comic monsters, who were defeated by laughter, with that perceived terror itself turned into something gay and comic. Such earlier images of folk culture are, he says, absolutely fearless and communicate this fearlessness to all, none more so than in Rabelais' novels where fear is destroyed at its very origin, and all is turned into gaiety (1984.39). But for Bakhtin, Romantic grotesque laughter's regenerating power has disappeared for the time being, something his work aims to recover, and he takes comfort from a new and powerful revival of the grotesque in the twentieth century, albeit that its reappearance and development at this point were complex and contradictory. He traces two main lines of development: firstly, in the modernist form (citing Alfred Jarry), which he says is: 'connected in various degrees with the Romantic

tradition and evolved under the influence of existentialism'; secondly, the realist grotesque (with proponents listed as Thomas Mann, Bertold Brecht, Pablo Neruda, and others), which he sees as: 'related to the tradition of realism and folk culture and reflects at times the direct influence of carnival forms' (1984.46). This is clearly his preferred option.

In Wolfgang Kayser's (1957) work, he finds serious work on the theory of the grotesque, but its true nature remains for him unexplained, having entirely lost its past memories and community nature, defined in its modernist interpretation as: "The grotesque is a form expressing the *id*". Bakhtin understands Kayser's Romantic notion of the grotesque as something "ominous, nocturnal and abysmal", not so much in the Freudian, as in the existentialist sense of the word; an alien, inhuman power, governing the world, men, their life and behaviour, reducing many of the basic grotesque themes to the realisation of this power; reducing it to the theme of madness (1984.49). However, on the positive side, Bakhtin considers: 'the grotesque liberates man from all forms of inhuman necessity that direct the prevailing concept of the world', whereby:

> The principle of laughter and the carnival spirit on which grotesque is based destroys this limited seriousness and all pretense of an extratemporal meaning and unconditional value of necessity. It frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities. (1984.49)

Bakhtin thinks that according to Kayser's theory and analysis: 'the grotesque expressed not the fear of death but the fear of life', noting:

> This assertion expressed in the spirit of existentialism, presents first an opposition of life to death. Such an opposition is completely contrary to the system of grotesque imagery, in which death is not a negation of life seen as the great body of all the people but part of life as a whole - its indispensable component, the condition of its constant renewal and rejuvenation. Death is here always related to birth; the grave is related to the earth's life-giving womb. Birth-death, death-birth, such are the components of life itself as in the famous words of the Spirit of the Earth in Goethe's *Faust*. Death is included in life, and together with birth determines its eternal movement. Even the struggle of life and death in the individual body is conceived by grotesque imagery as the struggle of life stubbornly resisting the new life about to be born, as the crisis of

> change. … Thus, in the system of grotesque imagery death and renewal are inseparable in life as a whole, and life as a whole can inspire fear least of all. (1984.49, 50)

This attitude and philosophy exemplified by the grotesque, seeing the life cycle (of life and death) as benign, may reaffirm the role of laughter as a ‘word against death’, putting all into proper context, for Bakhtin reminds us that:

> the image of death in medieval and Renaissance grotesque (and in painting, also, as in Holbein's or Durer's "dance of death") is a more or less funny monstrosity; [that] … the theme of death as renewal, the combination of death and birth, and the pictures of gay death play an important part in the system of grotesque imagery in Rabelais' novel. (1984.50)

(Note: 'Gay' is used here in its earlier traditional sense and meaning). Such an image of death as a more or less funny monstrosity, enables and justifies laughter at death, and deployment of laughter as a ‘word against death’, as an attitude of life, found in the medieval world of carnival, which Bakhtin suggests needs to be recovered. Bakhtin considers there is a need to counter the way that this gay, liberating and regenerating element of laughter is absent in the grotesque in the prevailing form of various modernist movements (whose theoretical basis can be found in Kayser's concept), for he suggests: ‘The problem of the grotesque and of its aesthetic nature can only be correctly posed and solved only in the relation to medieval folk culture and Renaissance literature’ (1984.50, 51). He cites how Lucian’s work *Menippus, or the Descent into Hades*, with its image of Menippus laughing in the kingdom of the dead, had an essential influence on Rabelais as a source of the Renaissance philosophy of laughter, as can be seen in Epistemon's journey to hell in *Pantagruel* (1984.69). Bakhtin asserts:

> Rabelais and his contemporaries were familiar ... [with] the antique conception of laughter from other sources - from Athenaeus, Macrobius, and others. They knew Homer's famous words about the undestroyable, that is, eternal laughter of the gods, and they were familiar with the Roman tradition of the freedom of laughter during the Saturnalia and the role of laughter during the triumphal marches and the funeral rites of notables. (1984.70)

Bakhtin notes: 'Rabelais in particular makes frequent allusion to these sources' (1984.70), stressing too: 'for the Renaissance (as for the antique sources) the characteristic trait of laughter was precisely the recognition of its positive, regenerating, creative meaning', thereby distinguishing it from the later theories of the philosophy of laughter of the Romantic period, which, as we noted before, bring out mostly its negative functions (1984.71). For Bakhtin:

> Medieval laughter is not a subjective, individual and biological consciousness of the uninterrupted flow of time. It is the social consciousness of all the people. Man experiences this flow of time in the festive marketplace, in the carnival crowd, as he comes into contact with other bodies of varying age and social caste. He is aware of being a member of a continually growing and renewed people. This is why festive folk laughter presents an element of victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death … of all that oppresses and restricts. (1984.92)

Here is further evidence for laughter in the face of death, and as a 'word against death', and all else that oppresses and restricts; a theology of laughter that reflects the eternal victory over death, and laughter of the God who raised Jesus of Nazareth from the now empty tomb on Easter Day, a laughter which is eternal and undestroyable. For Bakhtin further asserts:

> Laughter overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations. It was the victory of laughter over fear that most impressed medieval man. It was not only a victory over mystic terror of God, but also a victory over the awe inspired by the forces of nature, and most of all over the oppression and guilt related to all that was consecrated and forbidden ("mana" and "taboo"). It was the defeat of divine and human power, of authoritarian commandments and prohibitions, of death and punishment after death, hell and all that is more terrifying than the earth itself. Through this victory laughter clarified man's consciousness and gave him a new outlook on life. This truth was ephemeral: it was followed by the fears and oppressions of everyday life, but from these brief moments another unofficial truth emerged, truth about the world and man which prepared the new Renaissance consciousness. (1984.90, 91)

This victory of laughter over fear of death, and punishment after death, is a true liberation, and ‘word against death’, albeit often fleeting and ephemeral. Bakhtin

asserts:

> The acute awareness of victory over fear is an essential element of medieval laughter. This feeling is expressed in a number of characteristic medieval comic images. We always find in them the defeat of fear presented in a droll and monstrous form, the symbols of power and violence turned inside out, the comic images of death and bodies gaily rent asunder. All that was terrifying becomes grotesque. The grotesque image cannot be understood without appreciating the defeat of fear. The people play with terror and laugh at it; the awesome becomes a "comic monster". (1984.91)

Jonathan Griffin (2002) notes in his essay (see bibliography – journals) how depictions of grotesque bodies have a rich heritage in the field of painting and drawing, often summoning visions of derangement and dysfunction (sometimes sexual in nature), but warns: ‘the grotesque is an unpredictable firing weapon. When deployed, it usually sprays its buckshot on to more than one target’, suggesting: ‘when bodies are defiled or grossly exaggerated – they become more disturbing than simple parodies. There is no easy laugh here’, but … ‘uncertain laughter at an uncertain body has long been the hallmark of the grotesque’. The grotesque is by definition alienating and separating, and in this regard, is distinct from comedy (which is a convivial and socially cohesive genre). Death, too, is alienating, leaving us with uncertain laughter at an uncertain body, where derangement and dysfunction are all too readily apparent in the reality of death which confronts us, and where we need ‘words against death’ to deploy.

Griffin sees the grotesque as subversive, rudely transgressing the boundaries between inside and out, subject and object, above and below, elevated and profane, clean and dirty, which he perceives are gleefully and liberatingly violated, suggesting: ‘it has to do with the corporeal subterranean – the guts and the bowels, and the processes through which internal juices are ejected into the world’. Griffin suggests to us that this is a vision filtered through the detritus of daily life, where ordinarily suppressed desires seep through to the surface, and within the context of modern art, this notion of the grotesque is currently being re-imagined, often with humour and a sense of the absurd. Moreover, Griffin sees the history of the grotesque as intimately entangled with the theorisation of post-modernism. Griffin cites the art historian Frances Connelly, who suggests in reality the grotesque: “does not exist except in relation to a boundary, convention or expectation”. Death provides us with just such a boundary, where laughter, humour, and a sense of the absurd may give us ‘words against death’ to

counter it. For Griffin believes the grotesque: ‘allows us to get (at least a partial) handle on some of the most unspeakably vile and frightening categories of human experience, and it does so with humour and a sense of the absurd’.

Griffin notes how artists like Paul McCarthy are preoccupied with the bodily rather than the social grotesque, and seem to produce caricatures of caricatures, where the ill-defined distinction between self and the other is a source of much anxiety, and of how many modern artists: ‘portray the human form as nothing more than unstable material waiting to be reshaped by forces outside of its control – what Bakhtin called: “the ever unfinished, ever creating body”’. Death is indeed perceived as one of those unspeakably vile and frightening categories of human experience, showing that we are nothing more than unstable material, with death seen here as a grotesque, reshaping our identity to a shadow and caricature of our former animated life, removed with a force entirely outside of our control.

The use of the grotesque within the Christian Church and faith is not by any means a strange and alien phenomenon. It is found externally in decoration and the gargoyles used for water drainage (and the ancient door-handle of Durham Cathedral), internally in the choir-stall misericords and many a decorative pillar or ‘green-man’, and features in many a medieval manuscript margin (as detailed in Eco’s novel), and in the Celtic imagery found in such works as the Lindisfarne Gospels, and Book of Kells. However, I believe humour and laughter occasioned by the employment of that sense of the grotesque, in other words against the absurd and uncertain nature of death, can be considered as a ‘word against death’, since they provide a barrier and distinction between the living *self* and the now lost *other*, affirming our continuing life in the very face of loss and death.

Michael Steig's (1970) essay attempts to distinguish psychodynamic processes at work in our enjoyment of the grotesque from those animating neighbouring genres, not that the term ‘enjoyment’ is entirely appropriate when deploying humour and laughter as a ‘word against death’. Steig tells us:

> Thomas Cranmer has enunciated a principle which is crucial to the definition of the grotesque I wish to develop here: 'the grotesque is the feeling of anxiety aroused by means of the comic pushed to an extreme', but conversely, 'the grotesque is the defeat, by means of the comic, of anxiety in the face of the inexplicable'. This formulation of the complementarity of the fearsome and the comic allows us to move beyond the rather mechanical notion of the comic as solely a defensive measure against anxiety: in the grotesque they are more

> complexly related, in that the extravagant use of the comic can *create* anxiety, as well as relieve it. (1970.257)

In his description regarding the use of the grotesque as the defeat of anxiety in the face of the inexplicable by means of the comic, I find further support of the deployment of laughter as a ‘word against death’, albeit as a defence measure against the anxiety arising from the fear of death. Acknowledging the perceived inexplicable and grotesque nature and face of death, his comment that the comic can also *create* anxiety as well is also pertinent, for laughter too is ephemeral and its relief potentially short-lived, allowing the anxiety to return.

Janis Udris, drawing upon Bahktin's reference to a pre-psychological “cosmic terror”, considers that: 'The mobilisation of comedic mechanisms is what turns the uncanny into the grotesque’, and that a recurrent theme here concerns ‘fragmented or mutilated bodies’ (1988.150), linked with the early infantile preoccupation, described by Melanie Klein (1963) as: ‘a terror of being devoured, torn up and destroyed’, with … ‘the images of castration, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open of the body’ (1988.150). Udris considers the modern comedic use of fragmentation, dismemberment, etc. (such as that used by Monty Python, and specifically the: 'doses of outrageous bodily fragmentation such as Gilliam's animations’): ‘may then function as a form of “inoculation”, a defence against a more painful surfacing of fears of mutilation' (1988.150). And I would argue that the use of the comedic as a defence against fragmentation, dismemberment, and mutilation, can be further extended to apply to death itself, where the laughter of the comedic may also function as a ‘word against death’. Likening the grotesque to Freud's notion of the uncanny (a close cousin, with little to distinguish between them), and the use of the comic in either arousing or allaying anxiety, Steig says:

> The basic problems ... seem to be determining the typical sources of the anxiety aroused by the grotesque; analysing the role of the comic in arousing or allaying anxiety; and deciding how these characteristics distinguish the grotesque from the tale of terror or horror, on the one hand, and from comedy, on the other. (1970.257) (Udris 2003.4)

Death certainly remains for many ‘the tale of terror or horror’ which continues to challenge our mortal life and existence and very humanity, but one where I claim the deployment of the comic in humour and laughter can provide us with exactly those ‘words against death’ with which to confront and prevent it from having the last word, specifically in those circumstances when lost ones have just died, and all ‘ordinary

appearances of animation cease'. However, Steig cautions us that the uncanny and the grotesque should not be taken as identical, informing us:

> The grotesque involves the arousing of anxiety by giving expression to infantile fears, fantasies and impulses; what distinguishes it from the purely uncanny is that in the latter defences against anxiety are weak, while in the grotesque the threatening material is distorted in the direction of harmlessness without completely attaining it. That is, the defence is still only partially successful, in that it allows some anxiety to remain, and characteristically will even contribute to the arousing of some anxiety. This is the basic paradox of the grotesque: it is double-edged, it at once allays and intensifies the effect of the uncanny, the defence is complete, and detachment is achieved. (Udris 2003.5)

Steig, in reminding us that our defences against anxiety are weak, highlights a chink in our armour of self-protection. Whilst I suggest the deployment of the comic within the context of the grotesque nature of death can provide us with suitable 'words against death', I would acknowledge that this spontaneous instant retort and defence is still likely to remain only partially successful, in what he sees as the basic double-edged paradox of the grotesque at the same time both allaying and intensifying the effect of the uncanny, but nonetheless I claim that it is still helps us to achieve some sense of detachment in the face of death. Steig cautions:

> It is noteworthy in this regard that a psychoanalytic interpretation of the 'grotesque-comic sublimation' in neurotics (the ridiculing of others to alleviate a sense of personal worthlessness) suggests that this defence is unstable, and typically fails of the kind of total ego-mastery achieved by the comic, anxiety repeatedly breaking through. (Udris 2003.5)

In death we are dealing with a very frightening and powerful enemy, whose impact we need to counter to shore up the breach in our defences its presence occasions, albeit some anxiety inevitably remains, and risks repeatedly breaking through. Here I find Bakhtin, too, provides me with further support and evidence for the role of the grotesque in laughter and humour when used as a 'word against death', when he asserts:

> The medieval and Renaissance grotesque, filled with the spirit of carnival, liberates the world from all that is dark and terrifying; it takes away all fears and is therefore completely gay and bright. All that was frightening in ordinary life is turned into amusing or ludicrous monstrosities. Fear is the extreme expression of narrow minded and stupid seriousness, which is

> defeated by laughter. Complete liberty is possible only in the completely fearless world. (1984.47)

Here I would suggest we are not living in a perfect and completely fearless world encompassed by the envisaged nirvana of the Garden of Eden. Such complete liberty is not possible, and whilst perfect love might cast out fear, some caution in the cause of self-preservation against unknown, unsuspected and hidden dangers is prudent. Fear makes us vulnerable, but aware of possibilities, and if we love we fear the loss of those we love, however occasioned. At least death gives a finality broken relationships and divorce often fail to achieve. And a child or adult who is completely fearless may either be a danger to themselves, or not have sufficient emotional skills to survive. And what is more terrifying than coming face to face with death, especially as an ever-present reality in a world so full of violence, war, pestilence, and famine, brought to our attention by the media on a daily basis? We cannot laugh at the deaths or the plight of the injured or dispossessed, the victims of war in Syria and many other places as I write. Nor of the hungry and starving, or the victims of illness or disease that should demand our attention, compassion, and practical help, albeit through charitable and humanitarian aid agencies, where we need to act, not to laugh.

Whilst in this work I am stressing the use of laughter and humour as 'words against death', such laughter and humour, such as the derisive, superior, and mocking laughter found in much of the Old Testament, and the *schadenfreude* of the Greek gods, can be the very antithesis of such positive use as I suggest.

Bakhtin highlights *"The Night Watches" of Bonaventura*, by an unknown author (perhaps Wetzel) (*Nachtwatchen*, 1804, to be found in R. Steinert *Nachtwatchen des Bonawentura*, Leipzig, 1917), for a characteristic discussion of laughter, describing its meaning as follows:

> Is there upon earth a more potent means than laughter to resist the mockeries of the world and of fate? The most powerful enemy experiences terror at the sight of this satirical mask, and misfortune itself retreats before me, if I dare to laugh at it. What else indeed except laughter does this earth deserve, may the devil take it! together with its sensitive companion, the moon. (1984.38)

In this passage I observe the potency and power of laughter is fully acknowledged, effectively resisting the mockeries of the world and of fate (which must inevitably

incorporate death), not that death would itself experience terror at laughter's satirical mask, but asserting that: 'misfortune itself retreats before me, if I dare to laugh at it', which for me describes precisely the role and use of laughter I envisage as a 'word against death'. This indicates to me that even death, the most powerful enemy of mankind, may be defeated and retreat before the satirical use of laughter as a 'word against death'. But again we need to be careful, and whether laughter is appropriate depends upon the particular context involved. The image of the thirteenth Station of the Cross where the body of Jesus is taken down and placed in his mother's lap evokes pity and compassion, not laughter. This 'Pieta' is depicted by many classical artists and sculptors, not least in Michelangelo's marble sculpture on view in St Peter's Basilica in Rome. Clearly there are appropriate constraints to apply here.

Bakhtin clearly considers that these lines from *Bonaventura* proclaim the philosophy and universal character of laughter, which he sees as the characteristic trait of every expression of the grotesque; however, whilst this passage acknowledges its liberating power, I note there is no hint here of its power of regeneration, and therefore has somehow lost its gay and joyful tone, being thereby diminished. Whilst laughter in the face of death may not achieve that complete liberty and fearlessness he speaks of, nonetheless here I contend it can be seen as a 'word against death' by this very definition.

7.4 Death where is thy sting? A consideration of laughter and humour as 'words against death'

An example of stoicism and acceptance in the face of death, where the humorous and the tragic can be seen as parts of one picture (what Freke and Gandy suggest as being a Gnostic concept, similarly seen from a collective experience and perspective), comes from the First World War soldier and writer Donald Hankey. In *A Student in Arms* (1917), Hankey, writing in the horror and stalemate of the trenches, defined 'true religion' as 'betting one's life that there is a God' (1917.190). Killed in action on the Western Front on 26 October 1916, his words and witness I believe to be highly pertinent, for in referring to the optimistic 'spirit' in which Kitchener's army faced death, which I quote in part:

> Their spirits effervesced. Their wits sparkled. Hunger and thirst could not depress them. Rain could not damp them. Cold could not chill them. Every hardship became a joke. They did not endure hardship, they derided it. And somehow it seemed at the moment as if derision was all that hardship existed

> for! Never was such a triumph of spirit over matter. As for death, it was, in a way, the greatest joke of all. … Portentous, solemn Death, you looked a fool when you tackled one of them! Life? They did not value life! They had never been able to make much of a fist of it. But if they lived amiss they died gloriously, with a smile for the pain and the dread of it. … One by one Death challenged them. One by one they smiled in his grim visage, and refused to be dismayed. They had been lost, but had found the path that led them home; and when at last they laid their lives at the feet of the Good Shepherd, what could they do but smile? (1917.23-25)

Here is clearly laughter in the face of death, and such laughter I contend is apparent as a ‘word against death’, with death seen as the greatest joke of all, in whose visage they smiled and refused to be dismayed. Here is Christian faith expressed in the path that led them home, envisaged as to smile and laugh at the feet of the Good Shepherd. Hankey and so many clearly experienced far more than any Gnostic hell on earth in the trenches of Flanders, and in his words expressly placed his faith and bet his life that there is a God, and in one he believed to be Son of God. It must be acknowledged that many of the other war poets and artists saw things very differently, with no glory to be found in the industrial-scale slaughter on the Western Front.

Pictures of the horror and destruction there remind us of the grinning skulls of unrecovered decaying corpses in no-man's-land, showing images of death apparently mocking and laughing at mortal humanity, as do similar early photographic images from Gettysburg in the American Civil War, reminding us of the two-tier images of many pious medieval prelates tombs in various cathedrals, the image of ecclesiastical glory above, brought down to earth with the gruesome image of the skeletal decayed corpse beneath, reminding us: ‘you are as I was, you shall be as I am’. In the film version of Alan Bennett’s book and play *The History Boys* (2006), the teacher, Mr. Irwin, takes the boys to the local memorial to the soldiers killed during the First World War, and comments that the sheer scale of the numbers of the dead – the body count – and the memorials erected to commemorate them, was a way of glossing over our nation’s own responsibility for the arms race, a significant factor in leading to war, and was a case of: ‘not lest we forget, but lest we remember’, adding that there is: ‘no better way of forgetting than by commemorating it.’ Recent Centenary commemorations of that war now suggest otherwise. As Thomas Gray's *Elergy in a Country Churchyard* reminds us: 'The paths of glory lead but to the grave'. The central panel painted by Stanley Spencer for the Sandham Memorial Chapel in Burghclere, Hampshire, displays something akin to Hankey’s faith, for like his 'Resurrection Day, Cookham', it portrays the day of Resurrection,

with the dead being raised from their graves, and is itself effectively a ‘word against death’.

In contrast to Hankey’s expressed Christian faith, the Gnostic understanding for some of those early groups is either of a Christ who never was (perhaps a non-existent person based on the Grecian mystery dramas or tragedies, who as ficticious could never have laughed), or one who (as the *Gospel of Peter* suggests) appears more as a somewhat heartless ‘urban spaceman’, an *eidolon*, who thus appears inhuman and laughs at the one substituting for him in suffering actual painful physical death upon the cross. I suggest this particular Gnostic supposition is entirely unhelpful when it comes to giving any hope to humanity, giving nothing like the assurance of the hope and belief as proclaimed by orthodox Christianity. Whilst the ‘Laughing Jesus’ of Gnosticism may give some representation as to a state of awakening by which they could realise that life is good and death is safe, I would argue the Jesus of orthodox Christian faith (one who was fully human and alive, and actually walked the hills of Galilee), also calls us to a not dissimilar state of awakening with the Good News of the Gospels which his life and teachings about the Kingdom of Heaven bring. By faith in Jesus’ humanity and divinity, I suggest mainstream Christianity shares with Gnosticism the same central belief that life itself is good, but specifically in the Christian hope and belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Together with Gnosticism it also affirms that death is safe. Yet for Christians, if Jesus’ teaching is taken seriously, it also acknowledges that it inevitably leads to a cross for every one of us. This optimism, found in the Christian experience, may also be seen as presented in the message of Victorian revivalists, as a ‘word against death’.

But unlike the heaven and hell of the Gnostics which is envisioned as present in the here and now, for orthodox Christianity, the hope of heaven still lies before them even while they try to live out its precepts in the here and now in this world and in this mortal life. This is not hope in some ethereal disembodied future of the Gnostic conception of an unreal and disembodied Christ, but one that affirms faith in an embodied resurrection of the body, and to a collective future with God’s angels and saints, and with Jesus of Nazareth, not merely a myth, but a real person from history, a human Christ who, as one of us, and one with us, I assert can also surely truly *laugh* with us. But I might conjecture that myth is not the opposite of fact. A mythology is a statement of unquantifiable truth.

The problem some requiring facts and proof might have with this orthodox Christian viewpoint as expressed here, is that Newtonian science favoured by modernism clearly

suggests that the cosmos we perceive around us operates under certain laws, itself now complemented by Einsteinian science, even though the parameters are not the same when combined with quantum theory. Nonetheless, many affirm a scientific viewpoint over religious conjecture. For those who believe that Jesus as the Christ is Lord of the universe, the resurrection from the dead makes perfect sense, whilst to others of a rational and scientific disposition, it must appear to be pious nonsense. In developing a Christian theology of laughter, I believe that the beliefs, insights and understandings of those early Christians, whether Gnostic or orthodox, can be assimilated and incorporated into this particular research for our further consideration. For it seems to me that in both schools of thought and belief existing in those early centuries, it would appear both have either a 'Laughing Jesus' or a Christ figure who laughed, and so I suggest this too would justify the development of a theology of laughter. And this Jesus can be historical or mythological.

Cote (1986) acknowledges that, when speaking about God, our words concerning him must necessarily be inadequate, whether it be concerning historical revelation accessible only to faith, or to salvation history, and, by extension, must surely also include the doctrines and dogmas of Churches. Perhaps an existential view pertaining to existence itself has more in the way of transcendence. In his introduction, Cote states a theology of laughter will not immediately be perceived as something that touches upon the essence of our Christian faith, and some readers will be reluctant to replace their traditional image of a solemn God with a laughing and humorous God; and moreover, that those who are able to make such a shift in their sacred symbols of God may get rather more than they bargained for, and might find it a life-changing and even disquieting experience.

In the introduction to *Does God LOL?* (2013), Frankie Mulgrew asserts: 'those who have God have joy!', … that 'regardless of ever-changing circumstances, such people have an underlying peace and joy that no person, place or thing can take away from them, given that Jesus affirms that he had come to give life in abundance (John 10.10)' (2013.15). Mulgrew asserts: 'those who spend their time getting to know God during their lives develop an even greater sense of humour' (2013.134), and suggests that when we laugh from an innocent and integral source, that laugh is a glimpse on earth of the happiness we will feel for all time in eternity (2013.16).

When it comes to laughter, people often think they risk being irresponsible, and may perceive that perversions of laughter have always been judged more severely than the pitfalls of solemnity, and are therefore not unnaturally suspicious about it. In answer to

people who find it impossible to mix humour and religion, Don Maclean in *Does God LOL?* comments: 'Religion doesn't have to be dull and humourless to be effective any more than medicine has to taste terrible in order to do you good. Pass it on!' (2013.76). Judy McDonald considers God's humour to be the purest form of humour, because it is joy (2013.77), and that God gives us free will which allows us to see things from his perspective (2013.79), and did not give us this life just to be miserable, but to experience the fullness of life (2013.80). Cote thinks Christians need to rediscover laughter as something that offers freedom to the human spirit, which first requires learning and acknowledging that God has a sense of humour after all, and that Christian laughter can then become a new way of possessing our faith (1986.9, 10). Christian theology has in more recent times been challenged to reassess its suspicion of laughter, and in this regard, I affirm where there is laughter, there is always hope that in post-modernity, this situation has now begun to change for the better.

Cote's work made a brave attempt to articulate a theology of laughter in an age which witnessed a veritable proliferation of different "theologies", but he highlights one of the paradoxes and saving graces of human laughter, in that it redeems what might otherwise be lost. Such laughter is a phenomenon which can challenge, and even threaten, some of our basic spiritual values, beliefs, and attitudes, and it is little wonder Cote saw a theology of laughter as a "subversive" theology, which not only dares to laugh at everything we take for granted, but can challenge everything that appears to make sense, and which may also subvert our understanding of human progress. More importantly, he suggested it allows God to creep back into our secular world, and that this divine intrusion is not without its own subversive and humorous results (1986.10). Cote notes how:

> God is both the origin and goal of everything that is, including human laughter. Hence even our laughter touches the Divine with the fringes of its being. The person who meets laughter reverently, who accepts it as a sacred reality and not just as a human reflex, honours its mystery which is grounded in God. (1986.11)

It seems to me when Cote talks about the subverting of our understanding of human progress, he appears to allude to the Enlightenment period, and to the modernist scientific and rationalist orientated viewpoint that arises from Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787). I would suggest whilst it has to be acknowledged that the effects of post-modernism have allowed God to creep back into our secular world, it has also substantially subverted the view regarding human progress that modernism

aspired to. However, interestingly, myth and perceived sacred reality have once more become a more notable feature of many people's lives and beliefs, a clear return from modernism's focus upon total belief in science and reason as being able to provide the answers to all of life's many questions. Laughter remains as ever that 'mystery which is grounded in God', and as such, must therefore surely be also 'of God'. If therefore we do indeed laugh because God laughs, I agree with Cote's basic thesis that humour has to be seen as an integral dimension of Christian faith, but would go further to claim that Christians who have lost a sense of humour, have lost what I suggest is a vital and precious element and dimension of faith in God. When Cote contends we must learn to laugh at the human predicament in which every genuine act of faith places us, I agree with his assertion that: 'Only when God's divine sense of humour is acknowledged and becomes truly integrated in our spirituality can the Church hope to preach the Good News to a troubled world with any real hope of contagious results' (1986.11).

Cote's work both acknowledges a problem, and then questions whether it is possible for us to laugh in today's troubled world, matters which he notes: 'affect our frame of mind and emotional climate, making it difficult to sustain humour and a comic vision' (1986.14). But, counter-balancing this, he rightly acknowledges that laughter in its highest expression can be a force for good and a healing power, whilst reminding us it can also be used as a most destructive force: 'one that goes for the jugular, as it were, instead of to the heart' (1986.14). His analysis is, I believe, constructive, for Cote believes: 'Christian laughter is not incompatible with the potential pain of human contradictions, the inherent discrepancies and muddiness of the human condition, or the ambiguities of truth and goodness' (1986.16). He further asserts:

> The laughter of faith makes sense only if the darker side of life is also met with full recognition. Even when the situation at hand is tragic, ... [when] we may feel the burdens and darkness of the world acutely, ... the Christian remains in touch with the promise of Christ's final victory and knows that nothing of everlasting value will be utterly destroyed and absolutely lost, ... [that] the laughter of faith enables us to love the world God loves and yet not confide ultimately in it. Such is the comic burden of our faith. (1986.16)

By acknowledging the dualistic dimension to human existence, Cote lends further support to my assertion that laughter (as here laughter occasioned and justified through a faith in Christ), can be seen as a potential 'word against death' as defined by Davies, not least in the employment of the grotesque. Knowledge of the reality and

inevitability of death makes living difficult to cope with for many individuals, but I suggest that whenever a paradox arises concerning some aspect that is either amusing or absurd in the grotesque nature of death, this may well provide us with such ‘words against death’. This does not, of necessity, preclude or detract from the natural and fully human response of grieving the death of the other, since, as John Donne’s famous poem reminds us, any man’s death diminishes us, since within a collective society we are all intimately inter-related as fellow human beings: ‘therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee’ (well known, quoted by Aidan Mayoss CR, *New Directions*, February 2014, p.13).

I now begin to turn attention towards extending the use of a theology of laughter to encompass its use as a 'word against death'. Kuschel suggests Christians who laugh are expressing their feeling that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter. Whilst Christians might look to the fulfilment of some future parousia, and the hope of heaven in the life of the world to come (which all three monotheistic faiths profess, albeit it is open to question whether some orthodox Jews following the Sadducee teaching believe in ‘heaven’ or an afterlife), this present life, and this passing world, are not to be despised, no matter how temporary or transitory all things seem to be in this evolving world, in creation, and throughout the glimpsed cosmos with its countless galaxies of stars in the universe in which humanity finds itself, and in which our fairly insignificant planet and its sun from an astronomical point of view are placed. And by the same token, neither should laughter be despised as negative nor condemned, as many have treated it in Church history. This thought repeats in many ways the sentiments of a passage of Ludwig Wittgenstein appearing in his *Notebooks* in an entry of 11 July 1916 where he concludes: ‘To believe in God means to see that life has a meaning’. By this I think he means that the basis of our knowledge is limited, and that there are more things in heaven and earth than can ever be conceived or perceived in God's good purposes, and accordingly many so called 'facts' are often provisional and dependent upon one’s own personal viewpoint.

Kuschel affirms that Christians who laugh are participating in God's laughter at his creation and his creatures, and that this laughter is one of mercy and friendliness. He believes: ‘Christians who laugh are expressing resistance to a “postmodern” ideology in which everything is optional, to an aesthetic of indifference, and to a fanatical mania about the truth and the use of violent terrorism to defend the truth’ (1994.133). This statement ties in with what is Umberto Eco's specialist field of semiotics, where I highlighted how, in post-modernity, there is no fixed point or opinion seen as more important or relevant than another, and where all is provisional and optional. Christian

laughter may also be seen to have a proper and distinctive role to play, with a creativity and critique which is boundless and free.

Christianity has always placed a paramount emphasis on the resurrection of Jesus, which only comes after the suffering of the cross. But the cross, and the death it represents, is the place where Christians can identify and confront their many and most natural fears, and it is precisely here that they find positive hope that enables humanity to overcome them, and to survive in situations of despair and oppression. Here, in all that the cross symbolizes, Christians may accept the reality of death, both in its truth and fear, and overcome morbidity and both retrospection and introspection. As Tertullian noted: ‘A poor thing it is to fear that which is immutable’. Whilst I personally consider that the reality of the cross is something truly terrible to behold and to contemplate, it is nonetheless for Christians that place where faith believes death is overcome.

In the resurrection of Christ we may find the **ultimate ‘word against death’**, where I argue that God has first laughed for us mortals, and where, in that moment with significance for all eternity, he continues to laugh with us. For it is precisely here Christians believe that Christ broke through the extinguishing and suffocating bonds of death itself, offering them a new hope and quality of life – eternal life with Christ, and opening the prospect of journeying on to a place beyond their fears. Even as Christians face up to the Cross, especially as expressed within the tradition of the Western Church in the context of the Good Friday Liturgy, it is to St. John’s Gospel that it turns for the reading of the Passion, and with it the most hope-filled account of the four canonical Gospels. Little wonder that St Francis of Assisi, attested as bearing the stigmata marks of Christ’s passion, could regard our inevitable mortality in more benign terms as ‘Sister Death’, not as something to be feared, but paradoxically as something to be embraced in a laughter that would prove to be a ‘word against death’.

I believe that Christian laughter must be clearly seen to be distinctive in its use as a ‘word against death’, and like the laughter of the oppressed, to express ultimate hope in the future, and in the benevolent promises of God in Christ Jesus, even in the most exasperating and challenging situations of want and despair this world has all too frequently to offer. I suggest this must surely include facing up to the presence and reality of death. Interestingly, Kuschel notes:

> Christians who laugh are insisting that the stories of the world's sufferings do not have the last word, and are also offering sufficient

> opportunity to penetrate an attitude of 'postmodern optionalism' and an aesthetics of irony and enunciation and to show solidarity with those who have nothing to laugh about in this world. (1994.133)

Kuschel ends his work with a quotation from the American theologian Harvey Cox in *The Feast of Fools* (III, 20, 157): ‘Laughter is hope's last weapon. Crowded on all sides with idiocy and ugliness, pushed to concede that the final apocalypse seems to be upon us, we seem nonetheless to nourish laughter as our only remaining defense’ (1994. 133).

Perhaps for Christians, laughter must be enabled to have the last word in all things, for I suggest it is this trigger which can make life bearable, not permitting the last word to be given to suffering, nor to death, for as has been demonstrated throughout this thesis, laughter is not only a 'word against death' but perhaps essentially **the** ‘word against death’. Whilst Eco's humourless character Jorge would not agree with my diagnosis, perhaps laughter from God is after all truly 'the greatest of his gifts'. Cox concludes:

> In the presence of disaster and death we laugh instead of crossing ourselves. Or perhaps better stated, our laughter is our way of crossing ourselves. It shows that despite the disappearance of any empirical basis for hope, we have not stopped hoping ... It could conceivably disappear, and where laughter and hope have disappeared, man has ceased to be man. (III, 20, 157)

Cardinal Basil Hume in *To Be A Pilgrim* (1984) is totally realistic about death as the ultimate absurdity in life, but as a man of faith, with a gentle self-deprecating sense of humour, he writes about the Christian hope which mitigates its sting when he states:

> We live in a rapidly changing world. Nothing is certain. One thing is: we all face death. It is a sombre thought. We find all sorts of ways of forgetting about it. We use expressions which empty it of finality and threat. We talk about “going to the other side” or “passing away”. Yet it is the Christian instinct to be brave and to face death fairly and squarely. We face it because it is inescapable, one of life’s harsh realities. … Do not be fearful of death. Welcome it when it comes. It is now a holy thing, made so by him who died that we might live. … We must learn to make death a friend, to welcome it. For death is the ultimate absurdity in life if we don’t see it as a fulfilment; a pilgrimage to a place where true happiness is to be found. In heaven we

> shall understand how the gifts of love, beauty and joy, … are truths, which exist perfectly in God. (1984.227, 228, 231)

Laughter as a ‘word against death’ helps humanity face up to the reality of death, but additionally to take away its power and sting, and to place it in its proper context as the fulfilment of our transitory mortal lives.

A Christian theology of laughter is, I believe, therefore of the greatest importance to the proclamation of the gospel, and needs to be fully recovered in Christian faith and practice within the life and witness of the Christian Church in all her branches, and in every circumstance. From what has been written, and the numerous descriptions and views expressed, my research has led me to the conviction that a theology of laughter is more than a possibility, and this affirms the work first suggested by Cote and Kuschel, and further developed by Bussie with regard to the oppressed. Laughter is a reality and a useful theological tool, which, in my research, I have specifically applied in looking for evidence for its use as a ‘word against death’. We now turn to further consider Bussie's work.

7.5 Jacqueline Bussie's interpretation of a Theology of Laughter

Jacqueline Bussie suggests a theology of laughter needs to embrace and encompass 'the laughter of the oppressed', laughter which arises out of situations of tragedy and theodicy, on the basis that such laughter is inextricably intertwined with Christian faith, summoning us to reflect upon the creative potential of a theology of laughter as something which can inform our understanding of theology's undertaking, just as surely as theology can inform our understanding of laughter itself. By asserting faith and hope are both paradoxical and proleptic (anticipatory), Bussie considers in grasping the paradoxical collision between faith and reality (where the narratives of faith and reason are in paradoxical conflict), this requires us to possess not only a tragic sense of life, but also a sense upon which hope can and must be built, on the basis that: 'faith is born of the very stuff that also engenders laughter – contradiction, incongruity, and paradox' (2007.183, 184).

For Bussie, a theology of hope is seen as the counterpart to the theology of laughter she suggests, since she considers Christian hope is itself based on a juxtaposition of the narrative of faith and the narrative of reality, which, for Christianity, must ultimately be seen to collide in the cross of Christ (with all the contradiction and paradox it represents). Bussie therefore proposes a theology of laughter which insists that

Christian hope both fractures narratives of suffering and of negativity, and is itself fractured *by* such confrontation, a hope which is both: 'congruous with the reality of the incarnation, yet … acknowledges the proleptic and … fragmentary nature of its narrative of redemption', which in turn: 'affirms that redemption's “already” aspect is as real as redemption's “not yet”' (2007.184, 185). Whilst therefore having to live in hope proleptically (to wait upon) in the “not yet” present time, Bussie suggests for Christians, hope is not to be relinquished, because she believes such hope still actualises and creates a world congruous with it, an “anticipatory consciousness” in a world which can be seen both as a place of radical cruelty and pain, whilst also paradoxically being a place of radical beauty and redemption. Accordingly, she considers here: 'Theology's task … is to imaginatively live by and sustain the world of promise even in the face of its ostensible negation', and thereby to: 'strive to offer an imaginative, transformative mode-of-being-in-the-world to those who will listen', which, whilst eschewing dichotomous thought, is nonetheless unafraid of the scandal of both/and assertions, and embraces and expresses the both/and character of human experience (2007.185, 186).

Bussie highlights the need for theologians of laughter to listen to the voice of the oppressed persons of faith, who cry out for recognition of their experience as both children of God, and the rejected of humanity. In summary, it seems to me that her theology of laughter suggests five main themes, namely: (1) Faith and hope are paradoxical and proleptic; (2) Theology needs to avoid dichotomous thought; (3) Christian theology should sustain a commitment to theological honesty; (4) Theology should confess the problematic of a theology of suffering; (5) Theology must acknowledge the limits of theodicy.

Bussie's first point regarding faith and hope being paradoxical and proleptic have been highlighted in introducing her work at the beginning of this chapter, but in this regard she notes:

> A theology of laughter increases our consciousness of faith and hope, post-*Shoah*, post-slavery, post-Hiroshima, as inherently paradoxical. As our analysis of laughter in extremis shows, the narrative of faith perenially collides with the narrative of empirical, historical reality. This collision is so absurd in its incongruity of narratives as to evoke our laughter. (2007.183)

Regarding her second point, she considers a theology of laughter needs to set the narratives of promise and rejection side-by-side, and to affirm the constructive value of

juxtapositions, to wonder at the deep complexity of human experience, and to refuse to conflate diverse experiences into a false synthesis (2007.187). Such a theology of laughter would deconstruct either/or thinking, in order to unmask its potential to be either unrepresentative of experience and reality, or at worst, ideological. This theology would reject such ‘us-them’ distinctions as false dichotomies, on the basis: 'Christ's death on the cross shatters the pernicious “us-them” dichotomy that lies at the heart of anti-semitism, racism, misogyny, nationalism, hate, and genocide' (2007.187). For Bussie, such: 'theology can and should think creatively and subversively, providing an alternative consciousness to collide with the dominant consciousness when necessary', but nonetheless: 'not disinherit its scriptural legacy of prophetic critique' (2007.187).

In Bussie's third point concerning theological honesty, she asserts: 'A theology of laughter insists on the virtue and necessity of theological honesty vis-a-vis the problem of evil and the provisional nature of all theological statements', which, whilst acknowledging the problematic of human finitude: 'upholds a hermeneutics of suspicion with regard to answers and claims of conclusiveness with regard to the problems of evil and human suffering' (2007.188). She further asserts:

> Aspiring to the virtue of theological honesty, a theology of laughter confesses its own inadequacies, and endeavours to sustain a hermeneutics of rupture. This is necessary because a theology of laughter reveals that history has ruptured language, human relationships, and theology itself (2007.188). Theology must confess that egregious history has ruptured our faith in humanity and our understanding of our ethical and moral capabilities ... The laughter of the oppressed reveals that in spite of these ruptures, conduits of protest, resistance, and hope remain to those who creatively construct them. (2007.189)

Accordingly for Bussie, such a theology of laughter attests to the worthiness of the task of creating a new space within theology to enable a reconsideration of the work and importance of critical doubt as an element of faith, whilst also acknowledging the provisional and fragmentary nature of all theological statements and doctrines (2007.189).

Bussie's fourth point suggests theology should confess the problematic of a theology of suffering. Here she asserts: 'Christian theology must overcome its proclivity to legitimate human suffering … and look instead to the paradoxical scandal of the cross of Christ' (2007.189). By taking its cue from the laughter of the oppressed, Bussie

considers: 'Christian theology should sustain an interpretation of suffering as unsolvable mystery, just as surely as it sustains an understanding of love as impossible possibility' (2007.190). This requires the problem of evil to be taken with the utmost seriousness, whilst sustaining a narrative of hope in juxtaposition and in tension with the memory of radical suffering, a point underscored by James Cone (1982) in stating: 'There is no answer that faith can give for suffering that removes its contradiction. Faith in Christ therefore does not explain evil, it empowers us to fight against evil' (1982.63). Bussie comments: 'A theology of laughter reminds us that for every testimony to the power of evil, we must in the same breath testify to the power of resistance in the face of that evil. Such a reading of history transforms history into a place of hope' (2007.190). Accordingly: 'Comprehending the fragility of goodness, promise, and justice in the face of radical negativity need not fill us with resignation, … [but that] remembering suffering as enigma helps prevent theology from becoming platitudinous' (2007.190, 191).

Bussie's fifth and final point is theology must acknowledge the limits of theodicy, and here she suggests a theology of laughter can unveil the potential failure of theodicy, which, in the face of radical suffering, can rupture traditional frameworks of thought and belief, which then becomes for many an impossible possibility. She argues given that divine ways cannot always be justified, at least for the present time and not by finite human thought, a theology of laughter must be prepared to concede ignorance on this side of the eschaton (2007.191). She says:

> In spite of evil, a theology of laughter joyously affirms a bond between God and world while admitting all the while that such a bond is paradoxical, raising more questions than it answers. In so far as theodicy does not acknowledge its own incapacity fully to overcome the problem of evil, theodicy must be abandoned as an affront to the real memory of suffering. (2007.191)

Bussie further suggests a theology of laughter take up a position of antitheodicity, a concept which acknowledges the incomprehensibilty of suffering, and yet encourages a continuance of the fight of resistance, urging us to transform dissent and anger at the world's lack of redemption into a religious response (2007.192). Perhaps it is in this light much of the scornful, mocking and derisive laughter of the Old Testament may be better understood, particularly where the nation state was almost continually under threat from its larger and more powerful neighbours, and that much of what we are presented with in the texts is the all too human reaction and response of 'the laughter of the oppressed', even extended to apply to their perceived view of God himself.

In this chapter I have examined Cote and Kuschel's views in respect to the development of a theology of laughter; considered salient points of Gnosticism as outlined by Freke and Gandy; highlighted Bahktin and other scholars' views on the role of the grotesque; and outlined the potential of humour and laughter as 'words against death'; and, finally, critically evaluated Bussie's treatment of the 'laughter of the oppressed', which, until her work, had not been examined in detail. The following final chapter now draws together my thoughts and conclusions.

CHAPTER EIGHT: A LIFE OF TEARS, A LIFE OF LAUGHTER, AND DEATH DEFEATED! THE END OF THE MATTER, AND A MATTER OF THE END … A SUMMARY AND MY CONCLUSIONS

In the introduction I outlined my thesis and the aims I have explored in this work, having defined the area under discussion, including Davies's definition of 'words against death', and established the methodology I would be using to explore these issues.

In chapter one, the literature review, I outlined the authors whose works I would be principally drawing upon, including those which indicate a reconstruction of laughter in religion, and those which suggest constructive theologies of laughter. In chapter two I explored laughter in the Bible, the foundational Christian source for all critical theological thinking, and its implications for addressing death. After presenting an introduction and overview, I looked at examples of laughter in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible. In chapter three I looked in detail for evidence for laughter in the New Testament writings, particularly in the life of Jesus, before providing an overview of Gnosticism, and the laughter to be found in the contemporary so-called 'Gnostic' texts, in order to trace interpretative strands for laughter and humour in the earliest Christian era. I believe this presented sufficient evidence from my research to justify a Christian theology of laughter, in which I see the resurrection of Jesus as pivotal, providing us with the ultimate 'word against death'.

In chapter four I outlined a brief history of laughter in the life of the Church, from its early condemnation by various theologians and early Church fathers, and the developing monastic tradition before detailing laughter's role in the Medieval period found in its carnivals and feasts, through to it partial rehabilitation and greater appreciation within Church circles during the Renaissance and Reformation era thanks to the work of scholars such as Erasmus and Rabelais, which helped pave the way towards the emergence of a Christian theology of laughter. In chapter five I looked in detail at laughter in the modern and post-modern eras, and its potential role and function from a religious perspective, highlighting Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980) and the work of Mikhail Bakhtin on Rabelais and carnival, before exploring laughter and theology in the modern age, and its necessary role and place within religious life today. In chapter six I considered sociological insights concerning humour and laughter, and the emergence of liberation theology, because liberation theology more than any other theology focuses upon a setting free of those in 'captivity', in other words, articulating the need to give a voice to the silent, and to act against the

oppressor. This led to a consideration of the significance of Jacqueline Bussie's work in *The Laughter of the Oppressed* (2007), drawing upon her analysis of the three novels reviewed there.

In chapter seven the concept of a Christian theology of laughter was further explored, in particular detailing the pioneering work in this field by Cote (1986) and Kuschel (1994). I then reviewed Gnosticism's concept of a 'Laughing Jesus' and ideas of continuity after death within the 'life dream', which preceded a consideration of laughter and humour as 'words against death'. This was followed by an examination of the role and function of the grotesque in humour and laughter, before giving further consideration to Bussie's work and reflections on 'the laughter of the oppressed' in her particular theology of laughter.

The form of this chapter is therefore to express my own current thinking on what a Christian theology of laughter must look like, i.e., the constituent components of a viable theology of laughter for today, which I believe must also include an ability for humour and laughter to both express and function as 'words against death'.

I would assert that a Christian theology of laughter must incorporate and include not only the laughter of joy, but also that laughter brought about by tears, in other words, both the light and dark sides of laughter, both of which I believe can affirm human life in their separate ways. Whilst both Cote (1986) and Kuschel (1994), working independently, have provided a very constructive basis on which to further develop a Christian theology of laughter, I feel that Bussie (2007) has opened up another important dimension in her consideration of the laughter of the oppressed, which they had either overlooked or only briefly touched upon. I believe this darker and potentially negative laughter may also have an important role to play within a Christian theology of laughter, as has been examined in chapter seven.

My work has drawn upon insights regarding the role and purpose that humour and laughter play within society, as observed partly from a sociological perspective, which I outlined and commented upon in chapter six. This included consideration of the philosophical and psychological approach favoured by Sigmund Freud (1976), the sociology of knowledge formulated by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1967), as further developed by Anton Zyderveld (1983) highlighting the role and function which humour and laughter plays in transcending ideological boundaries. Here, too, Michael Billig's work (2005) asserted how humour is central to social life, stressing the disciplinary function ridicule plays within society, which together with the sociologist

Douglas Davis's work (1993), points out how humour can disintegrate social and cultural systems by undermining the conceptual infrastructure of society itself.

Also in chapter six, in broadening and developing a Christian theology of laughter (unlike Cote and Kuschel, but similar to Bussie), I have drawn upon the theological critique offered by liberation theology. Laughter, like liberation theology, is rooted in community life at grass-roots level, and similarly the Christian Gospel must involve a lived commitment to the poor and the oppressed, in which laughter must be allowed to play its part. Liberation theology, with its 'Kingdom of God' philosophy and emphasis on a theology of the cross, has aimed to bring hope to the world's poor and oppressed 'non-persons' by helping them to identify with the similar abandoned and dehumanised 'non-person' Christ in his suffering on the cross. Hence I believe the 'laughter of the voiceless oppressed' is important, whether it be laughter of despair or of defiance, and is therefore invariably and inevitably linked to the philosophy of liberation theology, and I claim may similarly challenge and offer effective resistance in the face of the injustice they suffer, in situations where liberation theology assures them of their rights and dignity. In highlighting the potential link between laughter and the insights provided by liberation theology, I believe this may offer encouragement to the powerless to turn oppression and despair into one of ultimate freedom and hope, all encapsulated within the broader definition of what a Christian theology of laughter may prove to encompass. This will also act as a very powerful potential 'word against death', and provide help in the face of all that seeks to harm, diminish or destroy human dignity and value.

So, a Christian theology of laughter may seek both to affirm and further develop the pioneering work of Cote and Kuschel (i.e., those positive and affirming qualities of laughter detailed in section 7.1 of the previous chapter), as a helpful introduction to this particular field of study. In that chapter and section I outlined and commented upon their work fairly extensively by way of ground-work as the basis and foundation on which I have sought to build, and so do not intend to rehearse this again here in my conclusions. But my research has also led me to take into account, develop and incorporate those insights which I have drawn upon from Bussie's work on the laughter of the oppressed (those negative aspects involving neither humour nor comedy, apparently the sole focus and development of her own theology of laughter), to suggest a wider scope for a Christian theology of laughter.

Having looked in some detail at some of laughter's likely qualities and parameters, I am further led to suggest that to define exactly what a Christian theology of laughter

actually is, must resist all attempts to restrict it, for like laughter itself, with its somewhat volatile and highly transitory nature, I feel such a theology cannot be restricted and constrained (as was so often the concern of the early philosophers and Church fathers and monastics regarding laughter itself). Nonetheless, I conjecture such a broader approach to a Christian theology of laughter as I put forward here needs to be taken seriously by other theologians, and take its proper place alongside other forms of theological investigation.

As has been consistently presented in this work, I believe that ultimately laughter cannot even be restricted or held within the limitations of any structural ecclesiology, and whilst it may display a beneficial creative potential and *joie de vivre*, it also remains a potentially dangerous and disruptive force which defies containment. My research so far has led me to this conclusion, for laughter offers the potential of freedom to the human spirit. Above all, laughter expresses hope and intuitive confidence in an as yet unknown future, a hope which places no restriction and knows no bounds. For laughter flourishes in the paradoxical absurdities, inconsistencies, incongruities and comedy of daily life, and as such seems to be inherent in the very core of both our human life and the human condition, being simultaneously revelatory, subversive, and survivalist.

I have also asserted that both laughter and humour may help and enable humanity to survive in situations of grief and oppression, whilst providing suitable positive ‘words against death’ as an antidote to depression and despair, especially when we are confronted with mortality, and the negative life-numbing reality and mystery of death.

However, I have here sought to outline and demonstrate that laughter is discoverable; that it is interpretive; and that it is a measure of engagement across numerous paths of religious apprehension as well as Christian, which my research and analysis has led me to conclude. So, given the volatile and transitory nature of laughter, and its very fluidity, I know that any work cannot be considered as a final definitive statement of what a Christian theology of laughter might be, because Christian laughter is, and must remain, an open-ended phenomenon of human life. At best, I believe we can only indicate provisional pointers as to what such a Christian theology might be like, and to suggest some of its basic fundamental elements. My work here is offered as a positive contribution in this particular field, one in which other scholars may wish to take up the challenge to bring further insights to bear on what I consider to be the important task of developing a Christian theology of laughter, in what could become an open-ended debate, and my contribution to the academic debate may therefore be viewed as a work-in-progress.

I consider there is a need to acknowledge laughter's gift-like and open-ended nature as a fundamental aspect of our human life and existence. My research also considered the evidence for laughter found within the early Christian Gnostic literature, which in turn jolted the early Church theologians into defining an approved canon of scripture, and to define and develop the Church's doctrines and belief in the context of Christian faith. My research has encompassed the early Church Fathers and their varied responses to laughter within Church circles, and considered the challenge to Church order posed by the phenomenon of the 'holy fools', before examining evidence for laughter within Church circles during the Medieval, Renaissance and Reformation periods, before subsequently tracing humour and laughter through the centuries to the development of liberation theology, and other socio-politico-cultural movements. As veins for evidence of how humour in God and humour in human life interact together, I consider that these do intersect and nourish each other, but acknowledge this latter point may be debatable.

Bussie's work has shown that many situations give rise to laughter in unexpected places, and, I suggest that laughter can therefore be potentially seen and interpreted as a protest against suffering and death, in other words acting as a 'word against death', and one which, as a powerful phenomenon, sees the other side of the coin, i.e., eternal life with God, where surely humour and laughter have their proper place (something even the most dour early monastic critics acknowledged). But in this interaction with humanity, it raises the question for us as to how our laughter affects God.

Here I feel an earlier consideration of the biblical texts is foundational for the development of a Christian theology of laughter; but again, ambiguously, the Old Testament texts present us with examples of both joyful and derisive laughter: God is seen to laugh with Abraham and Sarah, and promises continuity of an enduring covenant in the birth of Isaac, their child of promise whose very given name is celebratory, as compared, for example, with the condemnatory and derisive mocking laugh of God found frequently in the Book of Psalms. I suggest the various instances to be found in the psalms detailing the mocking and derisive laughter of God directed against the foolish and the wicked, may, *ipso facto*, have been extended to the dominant powers which were so often threatening them, and which were likely at any time to either dominate, oppress, or overwhelm them. In the light of Bussie's work on the laughter of the oppressed, such mocking and derisive laughter could here be seen as a perfectly natural and expected response as a way of dealing with any perceived 'enemy' against Israel, who saw themselves as superior through being the chosen

covenant people of God. These various examples detailed here (and in chapter two, above), are of laughter which, as presented in the biblical texts, can be either positive or negative; but there is, I think, nonetheless, sufficient evidence for just such interaction and dialogue between God and humankind.

If God laughs, even in a mocking and derisive manner, and we human beings reflect his laughter, and given that laughter is a generally accepted common attribute of human beings, it seems inconceivable that Jesus as both son of God and son of man did not laugh, even if the Gospels never mention it. However, this thesis has presented a view for just such underlying humour and laughter within the texts of the Gospel narratives. And in the most oppressive situation possible, in his passion and suffering on the cross, Christian faith attests that Jesus had the last laugh over death and evil in the resurrection, when God raised him from the dead. This is God's final triumph over evil, and this ultimate laugh over death is at the root of all traditional Christian theological understandings of human life in the here-and-now and the hereafter, i.e., the very Christian gospel (*evangelion* / good news), and the ultimate 'word against death'.

In such circumstances I believe that laughter and humour arising from and within such an overall broad concept of a Christian theology of laughter might provide sufficient affirmation and empowerment to help and inspire individuals or groups within the Church, to both challenge and counter oppression and its root causes. For in considering the Church as an all-too-human institution, with its own rather peculiar attitude towards laughter, we find a very mixed and chequered history indeed, one in which the stifling concept of the 'holy' appears to have almost entirely negated the role and use of laughter in the past (in a similar vein to the character of Jorge, the serious-minded monastic priest-librarian in Eco's *The Name of the Rose* [1980]). As has been demonstrated, the Church's attitude towards laughter has fluctuated from the early 'Fathers' and monastics, through the Medieval period into the Renaissance and Reformation eras, and continues on through into the post-enlightenment, modern and post-modern periods, but *not* to the degree that there has ever been any overall sense that the Church has been able to deal satisfactorily with the discomfort which is inevitably aroused by laughter. The very volatility and unstable nature of laughter has made it difficult for the Church to handle, and certainly unable to control, in the way which the medieval monastics clearly tried to. The very incongruity of laughter is a feature which makes it difficult for the Church to formulate any prescriptive ways for dealing with laughter, and, accordingly, makes it virtually impossible to establish that ever-elusive prospect of an all-encompassing prescriptive and descriptive theology of

laughter.

In my earlier consideration of Wiesel's novel (see chapter six, above), it was noted that the laughter of the oppressed in the Nazi concentration camps in the surreal circumstances they were faced with, was an important factor towards their very survival, and proved to be a veritable 'word against death'. Such laughter may appear to many to be distasteful, but might it also be considered as a gift from God to aid their survival, and laughter seen here as his greatest gift (rather than death as envisaged by Eco's monastic librarian Jorge)? In her work I think Bussie has highlighted an important aspect which both Cote and Kuschel had overlooked. This has led me to suggest that our theology of laughter must be expanded to incorporate the potential use of laughter as a strategy against oppression and oppressors, particularly in such situations (like the holocaust) where language either breaks down, is corrupted or becomes unviable, and thereby proves to be totally inadequate to express the inexpressible. In such overwhelming dire circumstances, laughter may be an appropriate response where no other realistic form of resistance is available or possible. Thus I consider that Bussie's 'voice of the voiceless' effectively becomes the *laughter of the voiceless*, a laughter which may fight back in the only way possible in order to challenge both oppression and its perpetrators.

I claim that laughter is a fundamental aspect of a holistic approach to life and its problems, something which can lift us from the quagmire of this world with its many 'trials and tribulations', and is something which can provide some modicum of hope, relief and comfort in the face of the suffering and despair these represent to the many who find themselves oppressed by such circumstances in this all too transitory mortal life. I maintain this would better equip and enable people to make a critique of (and even to laugh at absurdities within) our own society, and thereby to comment upon its value judgements, and, in the light of the gospel imperatives, to focus upon the misguided importance it seems to place on such matters as power, wealth, and security, with ultimate seriousness; in other words, all those things and situations which the teachings of the gospel may well be brought to bear to question and to challenge through the employment of laughter. I claim this is a necessary consideration if we truly seek to apply a fully integrated Christian theology of laughter in our lives.

This thesis has sought to make a specific contribution to the ongoing debate and development of a Christian theology of laughter and humour. Springing from this I claim is its viability for application as a 'word against death' as a particular feature within this theology. In summary, I consider my own thinking regarding a Christian

theology of laughter has gone further than that expressed by previous scholars in these following aspects:

1. The application of a theology of laughter in its use as a 'word against death'.

2. A proper consideration of the dark side of humour and laughter in the laughter of the oppressed.

3. A focus on the resurrection as the ultimate 'word against death'.

My own perception of a Christian theology of laughter developed through my researches throughout this thesis is therefore expressed in the following points:

1. That you cannot produce a prescriptive theology of laughter, but only an open-ended framework to encapsulate the volatile nature of laughter in a suitably Christian orbit, expressible in a Christian format.

2. That Bussie's focus on the laughter of the oppressed (which links in with insights from liberation theology and the novels she explores) takes a Christian theology of laughter into dangerous but creative waters.

3. That other theologians need to enable the Church to redress the balance concerning how laughter is treated in society and in the Christian community, in order to bring a distinctive fresh voice to a rather all-too-serious Church, which society considers to be out-of-touch and 'out-of-synch' with where they are. They need to revisit their own resources, i.e., the Bible and the Christian tradition, and the warp and weft of how society is, in order to make a compelling portrait of God and Christian salvation for today's generation and world.

4. That the contribution of this thesis is to re-evaluate a Christian theology of laughter, and to draw attention to the function of humour and laughter as an effective 'word against death' as defined by Douglas Davies in his work.

I believe there is sufficient evidence detailed in this thesis for a continuing re-evaluation of the subject, and to justify the position I have taken in this work. Here I have sought to move the debate on with regard to determining and establishing a viable Christian theology of laughter, and to highlight the potential use of humour and laughter as 'words against death'. However, I acknowledge that this cannot be the last word, and that further work and research could well be developed with regard to some of the

aspects I have briefly touched upon in this wide-ranging field of theological enquiry.

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